

機動戦士ガンダム

小説

閃光のハサウェイ

〈中〉

新装版



Hathaway

Mobile Suit GUNDAM

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ZeonicScanlations

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Chapter 01

Standing Position

Gigi Andalucia, her body still hot from her shower, stepped out onto the veranda of the cottage, exposing her entire body to the night air. The air wafting in from over the surface of the ocean seemed to invigorate the cells deep inside of her.

“Hm...”

She quickly pulled her hair back with both hands, letting the wind caress her neck. She didn’t care for the heavy feeling of wrapping her hair up in a towel. She leaned her body against the railing and looked out at the lingering sunlight across the ocean. Gentle ridges sloped down into the sea on either side, while to the west, they floated in darkness as the calm sea faded from dark blue to black in preparation for nightfall.

“Hathaway Noa, huh...?”

Her heart skipped a beat at the thought of this high-strung yet quick-witted young man being on the other side of the ocean she looked out on. But, not far from the cottage she was staying at was the base where Captain Kenneth Sleg of the Circe Unit, the man who would probably counter him, was.

For Gigi, she had no choice but to sell her body to older men, so looking at men like them was thrilling to her. Still, that wasn’t something that she could do something about, and it made her uneasy thinking about what lay ahead. So, she took long showers and stood on the veranda, trying not to think about the issues involving her.

Even so, her position between both men—Hathaway and Kenneth—was one she savored.

“...”

The sky overhead was bristling with high, white clouds, typical of the tropics, and beyond the haze above them, the gleaming light of several stars sparkling as the night grew.

“I had better hurry... seeing that I’m changing my plans.”

Her invigorated consciousness made her feel that way.

Ding dong.

At the sound of the doorbell, she rushed into the living room, wrapping a bathrobe around her body, and brushed her hair as she looked into the small monitor above the intercom.

The middle-aged maid, whom she had seen last night, was smiling amiably. Those that came and went from the officers' cottage at Goettingen House were employed by the armed forces, so her identity was secure. She had come to deliver Gigi's dinner and breakfast for the following day.

"Why it seems like the perfect kind of evening for a lady like you to have some company, but you're not having anyone over?" she asked, putting the things that needed to be reheated in the oven, and those that didn't on the table before she left.

Gigi didn't need the delivery lady to remind her how difficult it was to be alone, yet she knew how to cope with it. One could say that the vast majority of people's lives require 365 days of patient endurance for one actual day of enjoyment. At the same time, it's also true that one perfect day can get a person through a grueling year. Even if you can find some semblance of success in society, the time you spend in the limelight is a one-time affair.

Even if you're lucky enough for it to last a few days, it'll cost you several years of thankless, solitary work in exchange. It also goes without saying that this moment of glory is the result of some less-than-honorable deeds.

That's just how life is.

Gigi ate her dinner alone, watching the local news on one of the few cable tv channels she could choose from.

"..."

She had to understand what was going on so she wouldn't make the wrong decision when faced with the unthinkable one day. This awareness is what drew her to watching the news. However, the newscaster who should have been in a studio in Davao was just straight-to-the-point with old news about Captain Kenneth Sleg arriving as the new commander and the Kimberly Unit being renamed the Circe Unit.

"Everyone's keeping it a secret... Sounds like something the Federation Forces would pull."

Still, she didn't think it would be good for her to stay with the Circe Unit, even though it was convenient for her to gather intel. Kenneth probably would have arranged for a hotel near the base if she really wanted to, but her gut told her that would have meant selling herself mentally to him. So, she elected to stay at the cottage that Kenneth suggested for her, seeing that it was the only place she could stay far enough away from the base, so long as she was there.

The relationship between Hathaway and Kenneth was still unclear to her, which is part of the reason why she wanted to keep her distance from them.

With temperatures rising on Earth, the areas around the Equator became too harsh for people to live in, so when immigration to space colonies began, most of the people who lived in these regions were forced to migrate into space. Despite that, the number of people left behind to preserve nature and historical sites is probably a million across the entire South Pacific. Still, as the era of space colonies cemented itself, the value of these areas for

tourism and nature preservation area grew higher, and the number of residents from the space colonies began to climb.

This, in turn, allowed anti-Federation activists to infiltrate, forcing the Federation government to be cautious about its surveillance, which was not an easy task in a region dominated by the sea. So, they set up new staffing of police and military officers to expose illegal immigrants, yet they avoided making the organization too large.

Even the Federation government was aware of the perils of bureaucracy and attempted to sidestep using its privileges to increase the number of people residing on the planet. In this respect, at least, the Federation government had some insight. However, when the work carried out by such a small staff tried to be more efficient, their operations went to the extreme. Regardless of whether the intel was accurate, they caught illegal residents roughly and deported them to jobs like meteorite collection.

This led to them being dubbed “Man Hunter” behind their backs. These actions by the Man Hunter are what Hathaway had witnessed in Davao. However, the Earth Federation government, which governed the hundreds of space colonies scattered around the Earth, tolerated the Man Hunters tactics because removing the dissenters was not an inconvenience but a benefit now that those at the center of the government came to live on the planet.

This had been the attitude of the Federation government in recent years in how it managed the planet.

Nevertheless, the global uptick in the activities of an organization calling itself Mafty Navue Erin in recent years, and at the same time, the Federation government’s Central Assembly meeting being held in the south Australian city of Adelaide led to Kenneth Sleg, along with the new mobile suit Penelope, being quickly transferred to the Kimberly Unit in the Pacific region.

Mafty Navue Erin, whose name translates to ‘Just Prophet,’ is the spearhead of an anti-Federation government campaign to assassinate key figureheads in the Federation government. Prior to Kenneth’s appointment, the Pacific region, under the command of Kimberly Heyman, had been at the mercy of Mafty Erin.

With the development of the mobile suit, Kenneth Sleg, who had the idea of defending Adelaide, was ordered to defend the cabinet meeting. However, at this point, Captain Kimberley Heyman’s final operation against Mafty was still underway in Oenbelli, a small town in northern Australia. He was hoping to make a difference and avoid being demoted before his successor, Kenneth, arrived.

The Australian continent was just beyond the sea from her cottage. That made Gigi’s thoughts race across the sea. And, just as she had predicted, Hathaway Noa—whom she met on the shuttle Haunzen on its return to Earth—would be joining up with the private army in Oenbelli.

“Lane Aim’s Penelope was shot down. Word has it, it was by a wannabe Gundam...”

When Gigi heard this from the Circe Team, she had a sneaking suspicion that it had been the work of Hathaway. She was right, but Kenneth hadn't been able to confirm that yet.

That was where the three of them were that night.

Chapter 02

Keria Dace

The hot and humid air was suffocating, even with the door to the Valiant's cramped radio room kept open. The only audible sound was that of the waves lapping against the hull of the ship, as it was calm, and the direction of airflow was the same as the direction in which the ship was moving.

"How are things?"

Hathaway peeked in, wiping the sweat from the back of his neck.

"There's no change with Oenbelli... maybe they've been wiped out?"

Chartchai Coleman, shirtless, gave the receiver to Joseph Cedie, who was next to him.

"I don't think such a thing would happen that easily. Radios have a tendency to malfunction too."

"Either way, it's serious."

Chartchai took the paper cup from Hathaway's hand and drank the rest of the soft drink from it.

"Aaah..." replied Hathaway somewhat ambiguously, looking towards the central deck. The crew working on the mobile suits had quieted down, so it was time to move out.

"What's more, the problem is that the radio chatter is actually increasing from Davao to Guangzhou to Hong Kong..."

Chartchai grabbed a few files from his desk and showed them to Hathaway.

"These instructions, aren't they military orders to gather an army and police squadron at Guangzhou?"

Hathaway glanced at the contents of the transcribed radio document and frowned at the sheer volume of police-related radio traffic. Guangzhou, located inland from Hong Kong, is one of the few cities preserved from the last century and a favorite location for the Federal government's ministers.

"Masam is also saying to let them do it."

"Hmm... seditious groups in Oenbelli, the assault on the Haunzen... everything seems to point to a movement of the Council of Ministers from Adelaide to somewhere else... but it's too obvious. Hm?... Don't you think so?"

"That's also how the captain feels, but it seems pretty serious, doesn't it?"

"In any case, we're heading out. Continue your work intercepting their comms."

"Of course, but... are you saying the enemy's comms are just a diversion?"

"Come on, you're clearly intercepting too much, even for you guys. To me, that's what makes it look like deliberate comms."

"Sorry about that, eh."

Joseph grew flustered in front of the radio. Hathaway asked for a chart of their flight path and headed for the central deck. The sea air damaged the canvas covering the entire central deck so that some of the mended parts were almost torn to shreds, but there was no way to repair it. Next to the stairwell leading to the cabin, six mobile suits stood shoulder-to-shoulder, with several maintenance vehicles in between them.

"Everything good?"

"Yup, ready whenever... Aren't things taking a bit too long?"

The chief mechanic, Maximilian Nikolai, took out a report board from the mechanic's desk with fatigue across his face. Hathaway ran his eyes over the list of supplies and general repairs for the mobile suits. Hathaway said, "Please report the details to the bridge."

"Yes, sir."

Maximilian's voice faded into the cabin.

"Hath!"

Keria Dace's voice came from the hatch facing the rear deck where the Xi Gundam lay. She smiled joyfully at the coincidence of suddenly meeting Hathaway.

"What's up?"

"Oh, well, nothing, really. I mean... Are you really going out?"

Keria's small, round head turned around to face Hathaway before she fully came up in front of him.

"We have to figure out what Kimberley is planning. It might be used for future Mafty activities."

Keria hated those last words, just as she thought she would.

"The only thing in your head is ideology... You know that that's exactly what Mafty has set you up for, right?"

A clear vertical wrinkle became visible between her eyebrows.

"As a powerless organization, it can't be helped. So someone has to do it."

"Are you saying the organization is wrong?"

"This is all we can do right now. You should understand that."

Even though Hathaway felt it difficult to control his emotions at her selfish words, his responsibilities towards Keria made him endure such annoying conversations. In reality, it wasn't really something he could actually endure. It wasn't until he met Gigi Andalusia that Hathaway began to have feelings for Keria; in reality, he was the selfish one. It is difficult for a person's heart to remain forever selfless and austere. In that sense, Hathaway was still an ordinary young man, not someone capable of pretending to be Mafty Nabiyu Erin.

Of course, even after bearing the name of Mafty, Hathaway sought to remain strictly honest. Inwardly, he also sought spiritual nobility. But Gigi's appearance stimulated some more realistic desires in him. Unfortunately, these spiritual changes within Hathaway had begun to cause a rift between him and Keria.

"So, what happened? With that girl called Gigi?"

"I came into contact with a dangerous girl. I couldn't get rid of her, so I had to get on the Xi Gundam. That's what happened."

This was the official explanation he gave every time following his escape to the hotel in Davao, when Gigi was witnessed by his friends. However, within Mafty, an organization made up mostly of young people, such remarks by Hathaway were understood as a way to turn his personal issues into a public problem.

"I've heard this story already."

Keira had a twinge of sadness in her voice.

"I meant what I said."

As he was saying this, Hathaway felt that his voice sounded exactly like that of an adulterer trying to make up some lame excuse to his wife.

"Sure. Fine. I know you won't lie. And..."

Keria's eyes, of an indescribable color, gazed directly into Hathaway's.

"In all probability, I think you don't need to lie either, right?"

This was a tough criticism for Hathaway to take. Hathaway tried to slip past Keria's side, avoiding her eyes.

"Hatha... do you hate me now?"

Keria's voice felt so very far away.

"It's not something you can choose between, like you hate it or you love it... but if you tease me like that, I'll hate it even if I love it."

That was the momentum of things. Emotionally, it was a fine split. However, after having said it, Hathaway regretted it. It was very sly, being able to deny all responsibility, refusing to decide, and making the other person's intentions go the way you wanted them to.

"!!!"

Keria kept looking in front of her as Hathaway slowly stepped towards the Gundam, bitterly thinking that he was still just at this level.

"So immature..."

Hathaway was still indebted to Keria Dace and still felt grateful to her. That was why he absolutely could not lie to her. For Hathaway, that was more important than playing the role of Mafty. All that said, though, it was also too hard to say anything about Gigi right now.

He wanted her to leave him alone.

Even though he knew it was selfish, that was how it was. Gigi was of intense interest to Hathaway. In fact, the feeling he felt might even go beyond the simple fact that she was of the opposite sex. That was what Hathaway wanted to say, but it wouldn't be something that would go over well. That was something he could never reveal.

"Hatha...!"

"Sorry. Please let me work now."

"Do your own work!"

That was a lot of talking for Keria Dace. But that was the last time Keria was interested in pursuing Hathaway. She slapped a leather baseball cap deep onto her head, turned her heels, and headed back towards the bow of the ship.

She really cut her hair terribly short. Contrary to her personality, her split-second decisions were frighteningly quick. Hathaway viewed her as a boy walking towards the bow, legs outstretched in the shadow of the Gundam's frame.

He suddenly noticed sweat starting to trickle down the back of his neck.

"..."

Hathaway looked at himself, painfully aware of her feelings for him, as she kept up her demeanor. Keria was someone who might have been called Hathaway's doctor until he started his full-scale involvement and participation in Mafty, one of the movements opposed to the Earth Federation government.

During the regional space war called "Char's Rebellion," Hathaway, who was a minor and a civilian at the time, had become embroiled in a mobile suit battle. In the midst of the battle, he witnessed people around him dying one after another and even experienced killing the girl who had been his first crush with his own hands.

That experience left Hathaway with only despair.

After the war, Hathaway was put in front of a military tribunal, but his actions were exonerated in recognition of his success in downing an enemy unit. Suffering from prolonged depression, Hathaway was eventually able to reach Earth, where he was sent for treatment, as well as to become a trainee at a botanical observatory.

It was an advantage to Hathaway that his father, Bright Noa, was considered a veteran captain. Without such a background, Earth in its current situation would not have allowed him to become a trainee at a botanical observatory. Nonetheless, the fact that enough people lived on the Earth to make it completely self-sufficient also factored into creating social habits on the planet, turning it into a perpetual breeding ground for endless exceptions.

Hathaway was born on Earth, and the planet's environment both suited him and had a therapeutic effect on him. Nevertheless, he lived alone in an apartment in Hong Kong while studying for his exams to become a botanical inspector.

That was when he met Keria Dace.

She helped stabilize Hathaway's mind and nurtured hope in him for the future. Even after Hathaway left for Professor Amada Mansun's home of Manado on the island of Sulawesi to work as a biological observer, she came to visit him many times and even pretended to live with him for a while.

However, the two could not get married.

That was because she was an undocumented resident of Earth.

It was then that Hathaway was informed of the existence of the Mafty organization by someone calling himself Qwack Salver, who visited Professor Mansun. Qwack Salver was a middle-aged man who had become a General in the Federal Army. However, this aging man, who used the pseudonym of Qwack Salver, or "quacksalver," meaning a scammer or fake doctor, deeply regretted the fact that Hathaway's father, Bright Noa, was working for the Federation Forces.

"Your father knows that the Earth Federation government itself is the root of all evil today."

"Are you saying my father should aspire to become a politician in the future?"

Hathaway responded as if taking a shot in the dark.

"But don't you know that on Earth, the slaughters perpetrated by the Federation government are continuing and that the migration of the privileged classes is only becoming more and more violent? Yet, in Federation cabinet meetings, there are policy discussions that talk about the possibility of our polluted Earth recovering, even with a population of about 100 million people."

Qwack Salver explained many things to Hathaway about the state of the Earth; things that were unknown up in the colonies, out in space.

"And then, those who don't have residence qualifications continue to be killed by Man Hunter."

"How many?"

"These past few years, it has been in the hundreds of thousands annually."

"But isn't it a problem to have so many illegal residents?"

"Yes. However, there are many demonstrations and activities by people who do not recognize what we call 'federal privilege.' Their opinion is important, is it not? They denounce the hereditary bureaucracy and the political world as the problem. I am guessing that you don't know that most of these families reside on Earth?"

"The majority?"

"Yes. Statistically speaking, about 68%."

"That many..."



"This is why they have to recognize the residency of just a few commoners in order to maintain their lavish lifestyles. People don't want to live somewhere all by themselves, you know."

"I guess so... Is this what gives rise to cities like Hong Kong?"

"Yes. If things are left unchecked, the Earth will not regenerate. Industrial facilities will apparently remain regulated, but with more people, we cannot depend on imports from the space colonies for all of our necessities."

Even from this man who seemed so suspicious, both Hathaway and Keria saw that there was some truth, some background that they couldn't ignore. Besides, Qwack Salver's fearlessness was enough to reinvigorate Hathaway's nature as a pilot.

After that, even while continuing to be taught by Professor Amada Mansun, Hathaway often flew to various locations to learn about the organization of Mafty.

Keria was also pleased with Hathaway's renewed interests and expected that he would also become an illegal resident, just like her. However, about a year after Hathaway began working with Mafty, he became one of the organization's central combatants and left her. Having no choice, she started to participate in Mafty as district support personnel.

That was the history between these two.

Hathaway has no intention of denying that past.

But the question of how he would handle the Gigi inside of him remains...

Chapter 03

Valiant

As though it were escorting the Valiant that Hathaway Noa and the others were aboard, there was another ship.

The Ceelack, an old mineral carrier that had been converted much like the Valiant had.

Both ships sailed south in the Timor Sea along the Besar Islands.

This wasn't, of course, the extent of their support for the entire continent as two other ships were deployed to the south. Both ships acted as carriers for the mobile suits and the Base Jabber and Galcezon that supported them.

"From the Ceelack, Galcezons are ready to launch."

The Captain of the Valiant, Brinks Wedge, rolled up the front of his shirt once the crew finished confirming the signal with flags.

"What about Hathaway's Gundam?!" he called out.

"Hathaway! Are we sending out the team from the Ceelack?"

Iram Masam, seated in the XO's seat, forgot to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Please do. Julia's getting a little jumpy!"

"Aye, aye, Captain!"

Iram turned around.

"Make it so."

"Yes, sir!"

The Captain fumbled for his hat, looking less like a captain without it, as he began to flap it back and forth towards his chest with flag signals still in hand. There was no air conditioning on the bridge either, and a hot breeze hung in the air.

They were still in the gap before the rainy season, so it was still infuriatingly humid. This could also be considered as part of even more phenomena caused by global warming, and it was everyone's current state of mind that made them feel that way.

In the organization known as Mafty, as evident with the Captain's attire, there was no distinction between rank and duty, so if the time were to come in the future when Mafty would need something like ranks, then it would mean even more unfortunate times.

By sunset, Hathaway and his mobile suit forces would arrive at their target, Oenbelli, and see the battlefield that Kimberly's forces were mopping

up for themselves. Then, depending on how things played out, they might also engage with mobile suits from that same unit.

Moreover, should they find themselves bogged down by such an engagement, reinforcements from Kenneth Sleg's Circe squad, who succeeded Kimberly's, might even arrive. In truth, the army deployed in Oenbelli was a group that was unaffiliated with Hathaway's Mafty. Regardless of that, they were undoubtedly part of the anti-Federation government movement.

Ignoring them was not an option.

More importantly, Earth Federation Forces' mobile suits were deployed to cover the entire South Pacific region. If they failed to strike a blow to these forces and stop the Circe reinforcements, it would hinder their future operations of purging Federation government ministers.

A lone Galcezon launches with two Messer Me2R on its back from the Ceelack.

VOOOOM!

Two more Galcezon rose vertically from the forward deck of the Valiant in a similar fashion. A total of six mobile suits were launched. Despite this, the Valiant and Ceelack still had one combat team each.

"Julia, please hurry!" thundered Hathaway as he rose from the seat in the cockpit of his Gundam with the roar of the Galcezon overhead.

"I know, I know! I'm done!"

The mechanic, Julia Suga, wore a leather belt with a set of maintenance tools tucked into her denim shorts, said finally, standing up on the waist of the Gundam.

"You're still-?!"

Hathaway said, looking up at her, swallowing the words he was about to say as he flitted his gaze to the instrument readouts on his console panels. Julia leaned her tanned upper body over the cockpit, putting a screwdriver back into the belt on her waist.

"I told you to at least put on a T-shirt!"

"Never mind that! Don't say I didn't warn you about this reckless ass op!"

She didn't seem to care that her bosom, which seemed to flaunt her fitness, was practically in Hathaway's face.

"If we can do it before enemy reinforcements arrive, then we have the added benefit of keeping their eyes off ours."

He looked up to meet her no-nonsense expression, trying not to let his gaze linger on her chest.

"Look, I get that, but we can we afford to play the 'whoever strikes first wins' card?"

"We'll be fine."

"And the enemy is likely thinking that too, plus they have the strength to back up that logic."

"I know, but until I see for myself what happened to the private army that gathered in Oenbelli, I can't decide what we'll do next. Also, you should at least put a shirt on so those precious tits don't get injured."

"I really hate that archaic notion that only men can go topless, you know. We've been doing this for a hell of a long time. Besides, guess they're not all that bad then!"

Julia lithely stood up, slipping out of Hathaway's sight. At that moment, her young and perky nipples flashed across his eyes.

"Purge the attachments!" he shouted on a line to the bridge and deck crew.

KATUNG! CLANG!

The sounds of falling metal rang out below his feet. Above him, the triple-layer shelter closed, his cockpit seat now surrounded by a panoramic visual display. His gaze followed Julia's fit form as she bounded down to the deck. He knew she was right. He turned to face the console panels as the prone Gundam suit began to slide toward the Valiant's stern.

CHOOOM!

Hathaway's surroundings were replaced by a swirling spray of water followed by an underwater landscape. The Gundam had slid down the rail, legs first, into the sea.

"?!"

All of it was nerve-racking. It was his first time being underwater in a mobile suit. Despite that, the vortex of the main engine's plume prevented him from seeing the scenery of the surrounding sea. The cockpit shook erratically up and down, side to side, in the white bubbling seawater. As he conducted a systems check on each section, the Gundam sank deeper and deeper, to a depth of almost thirty meters.

The barrier functionality of each section seemed to be intact. Submerging the Gundam as he had done was the quickest and easiest way to check if it was fully airtight, not to mention the barrier's functionality.

"Great."

Julia and her team went without sleep to work on it, and their results certainly showed. He gave them a silent thank you and slowly brought up the thrust on the main nozzles, propelling the Gundam forward. At the same time, he was also satisfied that the shield and beam rifles on both arms proved resilient enough to withstand the external pressure.

The main sections of the mobile suit had to be capable of withstanding the pressure of depths of up to several hundred meters, as this was a weapon for close combat, making it fundamentally different from aircraft and other various weapons.

Resistance from the seawater caused irregular vibrations in the cockpit, a flaw resulting from the complete ignorance of hydrodynamics with the suit's design. Nevertheless, Hathaway made sure the Gundam could withstand the vibrations before rising out of the water.

The atmospheric pressure difference between outer space and where typical human life goes on is only one. Still, underwater, the external pressure one is subjected to easily numbers several tens of that. This is what prevented man from expanding into the sea and why it was possible to construct colossal structures in space.

Of course, temperature difference and radioactivity were problems in space for mankind, but solving these problems and shirking off gravity to move into space was much cheaper than fortifying against crushing external atmospheric pressures.

The Gundam's head emerged from the water, splitting a spray to either side, its wake leaving a white trail that gradually exposed the Gundam to the air. Water that seeped into various sections of the suit sluiced out in dozens of streaks.

The Gundam gained speed, hurtling forward as though it were on water skis. Its wake turned into a white curtain, and a number of small rainbows appeared as it changed direction. Then, as the Gundam's feet left the water's surface, it shot up all at once, following the Galcezon gathering in the sky above.

It didn't take long for the haze hanging over the surface of the sea to hide their forms as they slipped away into the eastern sky.

"..."

Keria Dace gazed forlornly at the sight, trying to shake off her lingering doubts as a cruel thought crossed her mind.

"This op is one where there's no guarantee that Hatha will make it back."

Long after the four suits were out of sight, Keria made her way up to the bridge. As one could expect, she couldn't help but confirm whether what she thought was true.

"Masam."

Keria felt the stagnant air of the bridge settle as she looked over Iram Masam's shoulder, keeping her gaze fixed on Captain Wedge.

"What is it?"

On the display in front of Masam, intel coming from the radio room and the occasional data captured by the radar were relayed. Staring at his nearly brown shoulders, she asked, "Hathaway didn't say anything about his being a dangerous op, did he?"

"They always are," his shoulders shook as if he were laughing.

"It's just that the ones we're up against are on a completely different level than usual."

"That's how it always is on the battlefield. This time is no different."

Masam knew how she felt, but he couldn't sugarcoat it for her. He went on.

"The Gundam? Now that's something different. He'll be fine with it."

Iram gave Keria a light slap on her rear.

"I know, it's just... The Circe squad has a similar type of mobile suit equipped with Minovsky Flight, don't they?"

"Hathaway won't lose against that, even with the Gundam inadequately equipped."

He turned to face Keria, his face glowing with sparkling white teeth.

"Right."

She was disgusted by how unfulfilled she felt to be the one to bring up such a topic of conversation. Padding Iram's sweaty shoulder, she moved to address the Captain, who'd been stealing glances at her.

"Captain. I've discussed this with Masam. I'd like to be put on a surveillance mission somewhere other than here, please."

"...? Yes, well, I'll consider it. We might even be able to fly you into Darwin, isn't that right, Masam?"

Masam gawked at him with a face that said nothing of the sort had ever been mentioned to him, but after seeing the Captain's wink, he replied.

"Of course, sir."

The Valiant began to change course, heading into strong headwinds that seemed to blow away any lingering doubts in Keria's mind.

"Oh, come on! Someone's gonna get hurt if you don't pick this stuff up off the deck!"

Having heard Julia Suga's shrill voice, Keria looked down at her brown, fit body.

"Must be nice to run around topless without a care in the world..."

Even as the words crossed her mind, she realized she was simply feeling jealous.

The Valiant and Ceelack had to move onto the next point where they'd accept support, and then onto the next, and the next, and so on, all to resupply both manpower and supplies.

Thus was the fate for Mafty, which lacked sufficient manpower.

Though, at the same time, it was also a necessity of the times when long-distance radio communications were unusable due to radio interference from Minovsky particles. Therefore, several possible rendezvous points had to be established in advance for replenishment.

Despite being aware of the futility of such an approach, at least three levels of rendezvous points were assumed.

Inherently, combat maneuvers have to deal with this level of risk, but odd as it may be, in an era of vast radio and computer intel gathering, people have often forgotten this and have neglected to take proper precautions. If one places too much trust in our intelligence-gathering abilities, they ignore instances that do not fall within the scope of those parameters. If they believe there is a supply system that can rapidly respond, they forget to consider just how the system responds in reality.

And so, when it was brought up that the system had triple comms to deal with any unforeseen eventuality, it seemed all but foolproof. The end of the old century was a chaotic era of information chaos. In a place called Vietnam, there was a skirmish between an army with modern equipment and local guerrillas, and everyone believed that the troops with the fancy equipment would win, but the results were just the opposite.

Moreover, the guerrillas had, in fact, switched over to modern tech at some point in their victory. Despite that, their opponents failed to understand what was really going on and continued waging war, believing in

their modern-day military formations employed in the early stages of the war, and thus lost the battle.

The dangers of modern times lie in the systems that support such convenience. So long as these systems are in operation, there is no shortage of examples of how man has become less imaginative in the face of a crisis.

Space colonies were built, at least in part, with such examples as a guiding model, though the advent of the Minovsky particle made people even more cautious.

The Valiant and Ceelack broke off from one another, each sending the other signals via Morse code, praying for the other's success before turning their bows towards their next mission point.

The Valiant slowly drew near the soft shadows cast by the Besar Islands, leaving barely any wake behind on the thin, glue-like surface of the sea.

Chapter 04

Pass Through Canal

“The way things are going, I’ll end up hopelessly selfish. There’s no guarantee I’ll ever see Gigi again, and I’ve been cold to Keria.”

Hathaway felt a heavy lump in his chest and felt he deserved it.

However, Hathaway believed.

To him, there was little doubt that he’d see Gigi Andalucia again, so, until that time, he could not afford to act rashly. Her beautiful yet captivating good looks and personality made him vaguely sure of it.

Maybe there was even a twinge of devilish nature for such thoughts to go through Hathaway’s mind. He was still young, after all.

Hathaway and his team were flying between the two islands at an altitude of about one hundred and fifty meters, the same altitude they started on. Despite flying across the straits, their view of the islands in the distance remained flat and unchanging on either side.

The light undulations and the coastline moving farther and nearer as they moved made their task of checking for obstacles in case of emergencies dreary and tedious.

However, once out of the narrow channel and into the Clarence Strait, despite just being an inland sea, a wide sea spread before them to the east. Bringing their altitude down lower, they immediately made for their destination of Oenbelli.

If the Kimberley Unit assembled at Oenbelli were anticipating the arrival of Mafty and his men, they would not have expected an incursion from this direction. They would instead expect an approach using the mountain range to the east of Oenbelli as a shield. For that reason, Hathaway and his people chose this route for their incursion.

Although Oenbelli lies just tens of kilometers from the coast, it lies below sea level; a dangerous direction to infiltrate from, with its distant view.

They passed two hundred kilometers of sea in less than ten minutes, entering the wetlands leading to Oenbelli.

Hathaway moved his Gundam to the front of the Galcezon.

“Recon. Also, consultation and combat.”

Hathaway gave the ready-for-battle sign to each of the mobile suits clinging to the Galcezon.

They saw what appeared to be the remains of several roads cutting across the land.

A few more seconds passed.

"??"

Hathaway saw wisps of smoke from the ground as they flowed past.

It could have been dust from cars.

He saw some houses; they were no illusion.

"It's Oenbelli."

Beyond the greenery that adorned the reddish-brown earth, Hathaway spied the silhouette of a cluster of buildings.

The town's name once called Oenpelli in the old century, is believed to have been changed to Oenbelli when the Federation government's immigration authorities misspelled the name when they typed it into their computers when registering it during the space colony emigration era.

"?!"

Hathaway watched as the pursuing Galcezon ejected their Messers as it gained altitude, then further lowered the altitude of his Gundam.

The head-mounted recon video camera started up.

"!!"

CHOOM!

He thought a missile had been launched. The sound passed.

The private military forces assembled here were not supposed to have mobile suits, so the mobile suits that appeared could only belong to the Kimberley Forces.

"!!"

Hathaway fired several long-based missiles toward the flash of light racing at him from the left. A huge fireball blossomed several meters above the surface when the flash intersected with the streaks of white, thread-like smoke.

The remains of the town of Oenbelli had long since drifted behind them, leaving a desert landscape spreading out beneath them.

Hathaway brought the Gundam around sharply, bringing the town into view once more.

"!!"

The pursuing mobile suits seemed to have gained altitude.

Even as he saw the Galcezon and six Messers charge into the mountains behind, Hathaway fired a barrage of missiles mounted behind his shield. It should be effective against pursuing enemies, but there was no time for him to check.

The Gundam accelerated, quickly gaining altitude, and put up a sand barrel barrier against the homing missiles. A myriad of led particles provided a barrier against missiles and high-performance bullets. Deployed too early, and they'd serve no purpose against a second or third onslaught, though for starters, it was effective with a rate of roughly fifty percent.

In the case of the Gundam, there would be a final barrier, but Hathaway knew that, at that moment, there was no need for it.

As the Gundam lost altitude as if it would slam into the gently sloping mountainside, Hathaway saw several fireballs billowing beneath him.

By the time the glow faded, the sun had already set behind the horizon.

As he was retreating, Hathaway converted the video footage he had taken to still images, comparing them to the map of Oenbelli. The Gundam approached a gently rising mountain range and descended into a creek two mountains over.

There, three Galcezons carrying the returned Messers landed closely together on the gently sloping plain of the waterless riverbed.

The Gundam landed in front of Galcezon 1 and inserted its finger into a small attachment on the bridge.

Through the windshield, its captain, Raymond Cain, gave an OK sign, and the Gundam's computer transferred the images it had acquired to Galcezon 1's computer.

While that was underway, Hathaway climbed down to the bridge of the Galcezon, using a rope in front of the cockpit.

"Yo."

Gawman Nobile opened a hatch in the ceiling, and Hathaway slid through it and onto the bridge.

"Where do we stand?"

"Hmph!"

The pilots, led by Emeraldal Zubin, were looking at printouts of the images analyzed by Galcezon 1's computer.

"We must leave now; the private military forces deployed in Oenbelli are nearly wiped out."

"Total annihilation?"

"See for yourself."

Emeraldal handed one of the printouts to Hathaway.

"What is this!? Bodies?"

"What else could they be?"

In the blurred image, numerous dead bodies could be seen.

"Kimberley must be panicking because Kenneth is here. If not, they wouldn't have done this to a group of people who might as well have been unarmed."

Raymond glared at another printout.

"I wonder if we'll be there in time. They're ready over there, aren't they?"

Hendrix Hiyo, the captain of Galcezon 3, spoke from the back of the room.

"Odds are about fifty-fifty. We can do it. And there's this too. These guys are heading towards Jabiru."

Emeraldal held out the printout she was holding to the group.

"Ahh? The self-proclaimed Mafty's Army?"

Hathaway saw the marked items on the printout and understood them to be a significant number of vehicles.

"I see that Mafty's Army still has quite a bit of firepower."

"Who shot this?"

"I did. I had the highest altitude."

Rod Hein, the pilot of Messer 7, looked over with a smug face.

"You saw it firsthand?"

"Well, no, I didn't, but..."

"According to the computer analysis, at present, there's no mistake. The number of people Kimberley has killed is in the thousands."

Raymond checked the computer printout against the printouts from the other Galcezon captains.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

Harla Morley, the pilot of Messer 6, looked over Hendrix's shoulder, her slender cheeks trembling.

"There's what looked like a tent village on the outskirts of the city, but it's been wiped out too. There are hundreds of bodies everywhere."

"I understand, but this will be a head-on fight."

Hathaway gave the order.

"That's what we're here for."

Gawman and the others seemed to respond with glee.

"Pursuit is incoming. Can we fly?"

"You bet we can!"

Emeralda's voice came in from afar; she was already outside.

The cause for Hathaway's uncertainty was that there Oenbelli's original residents might have survived, and he feared that if he did not make contact with the military forces gathered there, he would not be able to get any further information.

However, the computer image analysis showed that hardly any buildings remained intact in Oenbelli, and the town was nearly deserted.

They were able to identify ten enemy mobile suits and knew that they would be able to capture some of the group deployed there.

The only way to get more accurate intel would be to capture Oenbelli.

"It's going to be difficult. We're not going to attack in the dark, are we?"

Hathaway looked at his pilots, and all of them were steeled and ready for a fight.

Mafty's usual strategies were usually no different from assassinations. Such activities do not leave people in a normal state of mind. Plus, no matter the age, pilots have always thought of themselves as knights. One-on-one combat was their true calling.

This is the source of encouragement for soldiers, allowing them to surrender to nostalgia.

"We're good! No worries!"

"Let's give it a shot!"

They ran outside, leaving such words in their wake.

However, less than ten minutes had passed since they landed.

The time lost was great.

These actions were what Keria Dace was most concerned about.

However, Hathaway and Iram insisted on this action from the beginning, partially out of consideration for the feelings of their pilots but also to verify the massacre of tens of thousands by the Kimberley Forces from intel gleaned from broadcasts and amateur radio reports in the area.

Were they lies or the truth?

The amateur reports were indeed exaggerated, but they were not lies.

The Oenbelli tragedy was more than enough to enrage the pilots' sense of justice.

"The body count is a little more than two thousand,"

Raymond reported to Hathaway, poking the upper half of his body through the ceiling hatch on the bridge.

"Mm! Pass that on to the others, too, would you?"

"Roger."

Hathaway took the rope and slid into the cockpit of the Gundam, taking off without a pause.

"!?"

Signatures from the Kimberley Unit appeared on the display in front of Hathaway at the exact moment the Gundam crossed the mountain ridge.

His display wasn't a direct projection of the camera footage but rather computer-generated graphics analyzed by the computer. As such, so long as enemy suits were input, they would be displayed accurately on screen.

Of course, if there were a terrible gleam from the atmosphere, identification would be impossible, but in this case, the information could be taken to be accurate.

Hathaway ignored it and ascended.

In the meantime, the three Galcezon also took off, and the Messers on their backs were going into combat formation.

The head-on mobile suit battle ended in a victory for Hathaway because they had the advantage of having a Gundam, a free-flying Minovsky Craft.

When six Messers broke off from the Galcezons, and confronted the twelve mobile suits of the Kimberley Forces, the Gustav Karl FD-03, six of them went after the Gundam.

That was the enemy's mistake.

The Gundam easily took out three of the Gustav Karls, which were less capable of aerial combat under gravity. Meanwhile, an equal number of Messers and Gustav Karls faced off in the air, but both models of mobile suits could only jump-flight and only managed to waste time skirmishing for several seconds.

With the Gundam taking out half of the Gustav Karls, the mobile suits facing it instantly retreated, allowing Hathaway to snipe the remaining Gustav Karls from above as they were engaged in combat.

It was a one-sided affair, what you would call a "turkey shoot."

When they noticed that their consorts were being taken out, some of the Gustav Karls attempted to retreat, and the Messers took some out. However, in the end, only three managed to escape from Hathaway and his group.

The Base Jabber supporting the Gustav Karls, the Kessaria, had noticed their allies' disadvantage and had retreated early on.

This resulted in the three Gustav Karls that escaped losing their mode of transportation, and they had no choice but to retreat by jump-flight.

"We'll push on to Oenbelli."

Hathaway gave the order over the radio and moved forward to an altitude of fifty meters.

The Messers took the rearguard, entrusting themselves to the Galcezons, and followed after the Gundam.

Chapter 05

Mark of Oenbelli

The Xi Gundam spotted the retreating Gustav Karls.

"Sorry for this, but..."

Hathaway aimed at the legs, focusing on the verniers of the Gustav Karls, and fired his beam rifle.

Sniping without triggering a fusion reactor explosion is difficult enough when you are actively trying to avoid it, but at this time, Hathaway was capable of it.

Damage to the verniers that control attitude was damning for a mobile suit under gravity.

A Gustav Karl toppled, the suit cartwheeling to the right, rolling into a dry creek, as its shoulder slammed against the sloping surface.

Even though the computer controlling the remaining verniers continued to operate, the system converting the circulation of exhaust fumes could not work faster than the electrical signals running through the computer.

The Messer following behind would likely finish off the one that fell into the dry creek.

Mobile suit pilots weren't one to resist if their suits stopped operating, even if their weapons were seized. They're simply concerned for their own survival.

"What?! Are they running away?"

From the silhouette of the ruins of the town of Oenbelli, as if cutting through the shadows, a shadow of an aircraft taking off could be seen.

Close in, or snipe from a distance? The IFF computer hesitated to identify it as a Kessaria, the Federation army's equivalent of a Base Jabber.

"?"

In the meantime, the Gundam drew even closer.

There was no attack from the enemy shadow.

"What's going on?"

Then, the shadow split into two. The computer again had trouble identifying the two, as both shadows were caught by the camera, with only a slight offset from each other.

"!!"

Hathaway fired his beam rifle, landing a direct hit on one of them in front, and the Gundam vaulted over the resulting explosion.

The light from the explosion turned from red to white, sending a whirlwind of black smoke billowing up around it. However, he saw another Kessaria flying low, hugging the ground.

"!!"

Hathaway thought he could capture the Kessaria. There was no sign of any enemy mobile suits around it.

"!!"

Hathaway signaled the following mobile suits to secure the perimeter around the Gundam and then dropped toward the Kessaria.

BOOM!

The missile launcher on one side of the Kessaria's bridge was destroyed with one kick to its launch port.

From the roof of the building on which it fell, it slid down sideways to a room on the floor below before coming to a halt.

Debris from the exploded Kessaria continued to rain down, and above the black smoke, the friendly Galcezones and Messers glinted in the evening sky.

The debris from the Kessaria made a dry clattering sound as it pelted and plinked off the Gundam's armor.

Hathaway pointed the muzzle of his beam rifle towards the Kessaria's bridge.

"All hands, throw down your weapons, and come out!"

Hathaway broadcasted his order over the external loudspeaker.

The building behind the Gundam appeared to have been set on fire by the debris from the fallen Kessaria.

"But there's no foothold," a Federation officer shouted, peeking out of the Kessaria's hatch.

"Just use a rope!"

Their panicked reaction annoyed Hathaway. They had to have an escape rope at least, and he had to make sure they were unarmed by having them use the rope.

"Emeralda! Harla, Hein! Put out the fires!"

On Hathaway's order, three Messers descended, the remaining three advancing forward.

"We're going after the Oenbelli forces!" said Gawman, his voice managing to come in over the noise caused by interference from Minovsky particles.

"Please do!"

Not once did Hathaway's eyes stray from the hatch of the Kessaria in front of him.

Three officer-like shadows climbed several meters down a rope ladder, and after them, two pilot crew members took to the ladder.

"Don't move! Any sign of movement, and I'll incinerate you with my beam rifle! Although, after what you've done here, I don't think anyone would protest if I did!"

Hathaway shouted, opened the cockpit hatch, and leaned out, but the hot air from behind his suit was wafting towards the front, startling Hathaway by just how hot it was.

"!?"

Inwardly, he could understand why the enemy officers were frightened, but he ignored them and instead took a rope and handcuffs out from a compartment in the thick hatch and tossed it close to them.

"Take this rope and tie everyone's hands behind their backs. The last one of you remaining, use those cuffs and lock yourself to some nearby fixture!"

"Please, no, not this close to the fire!"

The highest-ranking officer waved his hands in a pleading gesture.

"You have permission to move to the other side of the road... That's far enough! Stop there!"

Hathaway brandished his gun as a threat, pegging their actions.

Several times, sparks of fire whirled toward them.

Hathaway watched as the fire-fighting work behind subsided, then sent a Galcezon down to secure the prisoners.

He then jumped the Gundam to the outskirts of Oenbelli and descended onto the scene of devastation that the cameras had captured.

"This was entirely one-sided, wasn't it..."

It was impossible to tell just how many corpses were piled up on that wasteland.

The Kimberley Unit had only been here for a few days.

Seeing how corpses could be spread out like this in such a short time, it was not difficult to imagine the nature of the battle that had taken place.

Due to the tropical climate, most of the bodies had already decomposed. The stench wafted up to the cockpit, dozens of meters above the ground.

Hathaway scanned once with his searchlight and then turned it off.

He had only caught a glimpse and could not see anything skeletal or dismembered, but he could make out the wriggling shadows of a few dingoes.

"Is this something that a human would do..."

Oenbelli was a small mining town with a population of less than a thousand. This meant that most of the corpses belonged to outsiders.

"The people who banded together and called themselves Mafty may have had it coming, but to purge them like this is unusual..."

He couldn't help but feel that everything was just downright crazy.

At that moment, Hathaway had no thoughts as to the legitimacy of his actions.



Faced with this horrendous reality, the actions of Hathaway and his people in trying to stop the Federation Forces who committed such acts felt perfectly justified.

"!?"

The speakers slanted down in front of his rang, and Hathaway reached for the mike.

"They went too far. We're a few buildings north of the ones that caught fire."

Emeralda Zubin's voice dripped with fury.

"Yeah... I've seen something terrible myself."

Hathaway jumped into the Gundam without bothering to close the hatch as he settled back into his cockpit seat.

He simply wanted to use the force of the jump to flush out the stench of death welling up in the cockpit.

He jumped over a building where the smoke refused to dissipate.

A flashlight shone from the second floor of the three-story building to the left of the two Messers. It appeared to be a rental building with offices for the ore and uranium mining businesses.

"Over here!"

Rod Hein waved his flashlight from the balcony on the second floor. The right half of the first floor appeared to be a supermarket, with rows of extinguished neon lights.

"Where's all the food from the grocery store?"

"It's all gone."

Hathaway descended to the second-floor balcony by rope.

"What about the basement?"

"It looks like it's filled with containers, but most of them are empty."

"What's going on? Where's Emeralda?"

"There were prisoners that the Kimberley Unit captured. It looks like they were using this building as a base."

Rod walked across one of the offices and into the hallway, shining his flashlight under Hathaway's feet. Hathaway turned on the flashlight he was holding.

"There's a terrible smell, isn't it?"

Rod's eyebrows were knit closely, but Hathaway couldn't feel anything, so he shook his head lightly.

"That so? It's horrible. It smells like rotten meat."

Rod's face wrinkled up in disgust.

"Yeah... I saw a crazy number of corpses. I think my nose is going nuts."

"I had no idea."

Rod quickly regained his composure but in a stiff voice...

"Look!"

He pointed his flashlight to the room on the right. Several bodies were illuminated by the light.

"It looks like they were tortured pretty badly."

"Looks like it..."

Hathaway saw that the body of a man with his back turned had a wire wrapped around his backhanded wrist. His fingertips looked flattened, and he found out the reason immediately upon closer inspection.

His fingernails were gone.

"Is Hathaway here?"

A flashlight shone in the hallway ahead, and the shadows of Emeraldal and Harla Morley appeared.

"Here!"

As Hathaway answered, the light from his flashlight that he shook in response lighted up the nude form of a man hanging in another room.

It was probably no illusion that his whole body seemed to have been burned black, but he did not have the courage to look again.

"It looks like there is someone who is still hanging on farther inside."

"Really?"

As Hathaway answered, Harla came out from the illuminated room ahead.

"I'll go get some water."

Satisfied with Harla's action, Hathaway then pointed his flashlight at Emeraldal, who came out of the room after Harla.

"Can they speak?"

"Dunno.."

Emeraldal stood in front of Hathaway as if trying to block his way. Hathaway glanced over her shoulder into the bright room.

"Is it a woman?"

"Yeah... She's been treated horribly. If we are careless, she might end up killing herself. Though that might be for the better."

Emeraldal gripped Rod's arm and shook her head, telling him not to go into the lit room.

"But, once she gets herself together, she'll kill herself, won't she? Are we just going to allow that?"

Rod complained about Emeraldal's judgment.

"Hold on now. She isn't capable of that. She doesn't have the strength."

"What's her condition?"

"Harla, fill them in, please."

As Harla returned with a canteen, Emeraldal took it from her hand and returned to the room.

"This floor was mostly occupied by private military forces. That means it's where the prisoners taken by the Oenbelli forces were held. The only survivor is the woman in the room Emeraldal just went to. The rest are dead. Some of them have been dead for only a few days."

Hathaway went over to one of the offices along the side facing the road as he listened to Harla's report.

"Where were the bastards?"

"On the top floor. You can get into the Gustav Karls' cockpit from there."

"Ah. That makes sense. These offices by the roadside aren't suited for confinement either," said Hathaway, as he ran his light through the office, which was still in its usual state.

"Bring the Federation prisoners here."

Hathaway said, aware of his insinuating remark. That was the least he had to do, he thought.

"I hate to do it, but..."

Hathaway hated his emotional response, but he could not suppress it.

Chapter 06

Mafty Navue Erin

Gigi Andalucia received a call from Kenneth Sleg after a satisfying dinner.

"Sorry, are you busy right now?"

"Yes. I am. What's on your mind?"

"I want to go to Hong Kong tomorrow. Is there a plane available?"

"What? You're leaving so soon?"

"I have responsibilities to attend to as well. I want to wrap up what I can for Count. After that, I may be able to come back here."

"Oh, I see. In that case, there's a flight departing from where I'm at. Would you like to take it? Let me check... What time does the C38 leave tomorrow?"

Kenneth turned to his subordinate and posed the question.

Gigi's tone changed to a more playful one, "Why don't you come and have some fun with me tonight?"

"Listen, I'm swamped with planning transportation for the cabinet ministers."

"Come on, weren't there a lot of transports going out yesterday? Just coming and going, coming and going?" Gigi teased.

"Are you keeping tabs on me?" Kenneth asked, his tone serious.

"For whom?" Gigi replied, feigning innocence.

"Hathaway, perhaps?" Kenneth baited, waiting to see how she would react.

"Captain, you're aware anyone can see the transports leaving the base from here, right?" Gigi pointed out.

"I am aware... Until today, I believed you were the reason Adelaide's operations were running so smoothly."

"I'm glad you feel that way. But even if I do come to visit, you won't be seeing me tonight, will you?"

"Not tonight, but I'll pick you up tomorrow," the Captain offered.

"Boring," Gigi sighed.

"Boring, perhaps. But you know, Gigi..."

"That's life."

"Departure's set for 8:00, so I'll come to pick you up at 7:00. Sound good?"

"That's fine. Goodnight, Captain. You're welcome to dream about me if you'd like."

"I'm afraid that's just what I'll have to do. Keep looking beautiful for me."

"AIIIIIIright." Gigi agreed before hanging up, the hint of fatigue in his cheerful voice not just a figment of her imagination.

Emeralda and the two other female crewmates remained tight-lipped about the woman from Oenbelli, who was still drawing breath, refusing even to divulge her name to the men.

"How did we get here, Captain Kimberly Hayman?"

"...no comment, Mafty Navue Erin," replied the Captain, using Mafty's full name with a hint of suspicion. He surveyed the crew standing behind Hathaway, wondering if the real Mafty was among them.

"You've heard Mafty's statements, right? Do I sound any different?"

"Who can tell? They're composites, and nobody can tell the difference."

Captain Hayman shook his head, sighing, trying to gauge the reactions of his men on either side.

"If you're used to the traditional, seniority-driven bureaucratic system, then a young Mafty like this might seem unbelievable. But, let's not forget, with the right connections, age becomes a non-issue, and one can easily climb up the ranks," added Raymond Cain, his words hanging in the air, only being met with silence among the five POWs, their eyes flicking nervously.

"No truth serum here," Gawman declared at the entrance, his tone carrying conviction. "You think we should resort to torture to get what we want?"

"If that were my intention, I'd leave it to the Oenbelli soldiers to handle," Hathaway added nonchalantly.

"You'd turn us over to them?!" The commander, seated beside Hayman, leaned over in disbelief, his face as pale as wax despite it starting to flush with a faint shade of red from anger.

"Your actions here will catch up to you eventually. When they find out what you've done to the people you detained here, there will be consequences."

"Please, I beg of you, don't let it come to that," he implored.

Hathaway was growing tired of the commander's predictable pleadings. "You claim that this army-like group gathered here is affiliated with Mafty Erin, but you should be able to see that we have no connection with them whatsoever."

Captain Hayman's eyes remained fixed on the floor, but his voice carried a weight that demanded attention. "These guys hacked up our pilots too. It was a lesson for them."

"?!"

It was like a petty argument among children.

Hathaway wondered as he gazed at the men in uniform, suspecting that they were actually grown men with severe mental issues.

"We only go after our designated targets, as evidenced by the purge of cabinet ministers," he spoke.

"We can gather ample intelligence without resorting to torture, wouldn't you agree?" Raymond added with a smirk.

"Let's give them a taste of the foul stench of death," Hathaway said as he descended the stairs with Gawman.

The deafening sound of a gasoline generator echoed on the balcony, but there were not enough of them, making the steps in the corridor difficult to navigate.

"What's the plan with these guys?"

"We treat our captives with the utmost care," replied Hathaway.

"Yeah, but these guys aren't part of the Circe unit. So they won't provide us with any valuable intel that could benefit us in the future," Gawman pointed out.

"It may hinder our progress, but we can leverage them for a prisoner swap."

"Is Kenneth one of those wild card types?"

Gawman, having been held captive by Kenneth, had a more intimate understanding than Hathaway of just how unorthodox his methods were.

"Appealing to the masses is a powerful tool, so even harnessing just a fraction of its potential can be a game changer," Hathaway remarked. Still, Gawman remained silent as he pivoted and walked down the corridor.

A chorus of laughter and hushed discussions echoed down the hall, a telltale sign of individuals at ease. Gawman pushed open the door, the bright light from the makeshift lighting spilling into the dim hallway, momentarily blinding Hathaway.

The atmosphere shifted with a palpable sense of unease as Gaiman's call rang out with a rogue-like timbre.

"Fabio. Fabio Rivera! We're Mafty."

As Hathaway struggled to make out the figures in the harsh light, he saw several figures stand, and one of them barked out a question.

"Which one of you's?" the voice growled. It was English but with a thick Spanish accent.

"So it's you? The imposter pretending to be Mafty?"

Hathaway locked eyes with the bushy beard of the man known as Fabio Rivera, which hung just inches from his face.

"I'll be damned. If this isn't a joke, I've been duped into giving away my identity to some inexperienced upstart! Eh!?"

Some of the people lounging in the background chuckled in response to Fabio's outrage.

"Probably because of your lack of imagination."

"What did you say?" Fabio scowled, bringing his face down to Hathaway's level.

"I understand your views are narrow-minded, but I'm not much better. I cannot easily trick others. To be able to impersonate Mafty's army, one must possess wit and intelligence. I'd love to meet such a leader if they exist. But, perhaps, they've already met their demise on this battlefield."

"What makes you say that?"

"A man with a pistol taking on a mobile suit is a testament to their bravery. It wouldn't be surprising if they lost their life on this battlefield. Is that something I came up with because I lack imagination?"

"That's all you have to say?"

"For now, yes. So, are you the leader of the surviving group?"

Hathaway sidestepped the man's contemptuous sneer.

"I am Fabio Rivera, the one who commanded the establishment of a line of resistance on our soil. I came up with the idea of forming an air force to exploit the gap in the Federation's supplies. This was only possible because of my anti-Federation sentiments. Plus, I have more experience than a bunch of pissants like you all," his crude language masking his unwavering confidence.

If that were the case, it would certainly imbue him with the capacity to guide others. Hathaway recognized how a person with such a commanding presence might easily captivate and influence others.

But now was not the moment to falter.

"Genuine leaders don't need to hide behind false identities as you did with Mafty. Your actions were deceptive and underhanded. If you really were the one who came up with that idea, then you've got some pretty filthy ulterior motives."

For the first time, Hathaway locked eyes with Fabio.

"Pfeh! That's rich. What makes you think they're filthy?"

"You employed Mafty's actions as a diversion, yet Kimberly emerged with surprising fortitude. And so, here we see the outcome. A leader must be willing to accept accountability for their decisions."

"Hmph!"

Fabio Rivera drew himself up, shaking his head, facing Hathaway's accusations head-on.

"That's why I didn't run away. And let's not forget, Mafty wasn't exactly quick on their feet either. That's why things turned out as they did."

"Like hell, it isn't! After you took matters into your own hands--"

"We were clueless on how to reach Qwack Salver," Fabio offered a conciliatory shrug to those behind him, suddenly appearing as a middle-aged man with a more honest demeanor.

"It seems to me that your little Oenbelli army would have planned on annihilating all the ministers in Adelaide, your goal being to form an air force comprised of illegal residents, but you didn't even have a leg to stand on. You hastily attacked the Haunzen, resulting in a chaotic and ill-prepared assault."

"Fabio! We didn't screw up nearly as bad as that squirt claims," a young man with a scruffy beard and a swollen face interjected from behind. "Once that guy with the footage escapes into space, things will shift in our favor again."

"What is he implying by that?"

"What? I happen to have a guy who smuggled a tape into space, revealing the atrocities committed by Kimberly's forces on the battlefield."

"I highly doubt that he'll make it," Gawman said, stepping forward for the first time, blocking Hathaway's view.

"Not everyone is an undocumented resident, and you should know how easy it is to secure a ticket to space from Earth."

"What sort of tape is it? Do you have a copy?"

"Didn't have the time to make one."

"Let me tell you something," a female crew member, who sat cross-legged on a desk in a drunken stupor, screeched. "We had our escape routes blocked and were crushed and trampled by the mobile suits. That's how Kimberly operates!"

"Mobile suits?" Hathaway echoed, finally understanding the reason behind the corpses on the city's outskirts.

"He was playing with us, like toys," she added with a hint of derision in her voice.

The use of mobile suits for such actions was a glaringly flawed method. Despite possibly serving as a warning, it wouldn't have any real impact as there was no media coverage on the battlefield. Despite that, the entire ordeal still seemed strange. At times, the actions of a few mobile suits were misconstrued as the strategy of Kimberly's entire unit by those who saw it.

A voice behind the female crew member spoke up, "Let it go, Mei Ho. Mafty's group can only see our struggles through their robot's perspective. They're not much different from Kimberly."

"Who? Who said that!?"

Gawman's fist rose in response, but Hathaway swiftly intervened, pulling him from the room.

As the number of people grows, situations only become more complicated and chaotic. When attempting to make crucial decisions, emotions tend to run high. This was what Qwack Salver feared the most when he founded the Mafty organization.

That's how the current situation appeared to Hathaway.

"What!" Gawman barked in the dimly lit corridor, his eyes blazing.

"We're pulling out."

"But to hear them talk about us like that!" Gawman protested.

"Mafty!" Fabio bellowed, his massive form barreling towards them from the illuminated office.

"So why aren't we discussing what lies ahead? Somebody known as 'Mafty' should have the brains to think a little further ahead."

"I didn't see the need to upset you, so I kept quiet and left."

"Don't press your luck, kid..."

"I have no intention of babying you just because you can't handle the truth."

Gawman bit his lip.

"Let's get real. Do I call you Mr. Mafty? Do my words strike a nerve?"

"Your rough calculation shows that around 5,000 survivors are scattered across Oenbelli, and even if they somehow managed to gather, we lack the

capability to sustain that many. Therefore, it's in our best interest to go our separate ways."

"You're just like I thought you were. You're just a bunch of pussies, aren't you?"

"He has the brains to think about the economic aspect."

A shadowy figure, lurking and observing the trio, emerged from the glowing light of the office.

"That would be Chang Hei. As I was saying, that's why we sought to secure our own funding source. The attack on Haunzen was a result of that desire."

"It was too rough. The passengers didn't just include ministers but also Kimberly's successor, Kenneth Sleg himself. He overpowered the hijackers."

"Well-informed, indeed. So, what's next on the agenda? What's the plan for Mafty?"

With Fabio's agitation subsiding, Hathaway gestured for Gawman to open a door, and they all stepped through it. He placed his flashlight on the desk and aimed it toward Fabio.

"We'll continue methodically eliminating cabinet ministers, as we've been doing."

"In Adelaide?"

"Why not?"

Fabio's massive frame shuffled about, his grin belying his scruffy exterior.

"That won't work. We'll seize control of the nearby airport, commandeer a plane, and fly straight to Guangzhou."

"Guangzhou?"

Thinking back, Hathaway recalled the name of the Chinese city that Chachai and the others had mentioned earlier in the day, envisioning the location in his mind.

"That's where the Earth Federation government cabinet meeting will be held," Chang Hei declared confidently from behind Fabio.

But Gawman disputed, "We suspect that information was deliberately leaked to deceive us."

Fabio gestured to Chang. Chang reached into the pocket of his windbreaker and produced several sheets of paper, handing one of them to Fabio.

"This telegram was sent from Davao to the Hong Kong government offices just as the Minovsky particles Kimberly used thinned out. We, uh... intercepted an order from Hundley Yeoksan, Chief of the Criminal Police Organization, to the Asian Regional Criminal Police Organization to reinforce ground forces in Guangzhou."

"Hm..."

Hathaway's thoughts drifted back to the encounter on the Haunzen and the impeccably dressed police chief at Davao airport. He let Fabio proceed.

"Haunzen. Hundley Yeoksan. Don't read too much into this radio signal as proof that the cabinet meeting has been moved to Guangzhou. We regularly intercept similar transmissions."

"But you do realize that Haunzen had a third of all the ministers on board, right? Do you really think they would risk making such a call over a radio that could be intercepted?"

"So, where is it then?" Fabio questioned, wavering under Gawman's aggressive stance.

"Still in Adelaide. Nothing has changed," Hathaway declared with certainty.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because the ministers are a bunch of old codgers who don't like to be bothered."

Fabio erupted into loud laughter at Hathaway's words.

"There it is, what I'm talking about. Who doesn't have a leg to stand on now? You're the ones being sloppy now. Well, good luck with that." Fabio said as he rose from his seat and walked out of the flashlight's reach.

Chang remained in its light, ruminating on the idea that had just been brought up.

"Think about it, Mafty. If we could release our tape to the public from space, it would be enough to force the current Federation ministers to resign. That would serve one of Mafty's objectives, wouldn't it?"

Gawman didn't seem convinced, "Hmph. Even if that were true, then we wouldn't have to kill anybody. One tape may stir public opinion, but the Federation government will still be sitting pretty on Earth!"

"We need to show that we're not afraid to fight, even if it means building our own army."

"Chang Hei, it's great to have someone of your caliber in the Oenbelli Army. However, the opportunity to strike Davao and their new mobile suits has been missed, and we have you to thank for that."

And with that, Hathaway turned and walked out the door.

Hathaway directed Emeraldal and the rest to pull out and transferred Kimberly and the surviving prisoners to the Galcezon 1.

"The Oenbelli Army doesn't even have a proper ambulance. So move the ones who are still breathing over here."

Emeraldal gave a nonchalant shrug at the orders.

"...?"

"She's dead. Why don't you let Fabio know and have them bury her?"

"That girl?"

"Yeah..."

"I see. It would be more fitting for someone who knew her to lay her to rest."

And with that, Hathaway withdrew from Oenbelli.

Chapter 07

Kenneth & Gigi

The next morning, Captain Kenneth Sleg kept his promise and arrived outside Gigi's cottage.

"We missed our chance to take down Mafty. If we had caught up to Oenbelli yesterday, we could have wiped out their main machines," he admitted, appearing neither tired nor genuinely concerned.

Gigi was quick to question his excuse for the delay.

"So, the real reason you were late is that you were making repairs to the Penelope?" she asked skeptically.

"Yes, that's right. But Lane Aim gained valuable combat experience, so he won't be at risk of being thrown into the sea again."

He accepted Gigi's suitcase from the cottage maid and loaded it into his car, which was parked on the side of the road.

He understood the stupidity of what he was doing.

Carrying luggage for a girl like Gigi, who was barely 20 years old, during an operation to boot, was nothing short of idiocy.

But still, standing before her, Kenneth, who was in his thirties, was convinced that this was the right thing to do.

"In addition to everything else, there's the burden of escorting cabinet members," Gigi said, in a good mood after being able to wear her favorite outfit from her luggage.

Sitting in the driver's seat was a middle-aged non-commissioned officer with a sour expression.

"Well, that's true. But they're people important enough to be called cabinet members. So they'll order us to spread false information as a precaution, which only adds to our workload and makes it impossible for our unit to do its job," Kenneth said, unwittingly speaking more freely in front of the girl.

One could only accept this as another part of the beauty of life, recognizing that being meticulous was not the only way to live.

Although having a wife would have made such behavior unseemly, as of now, Kenneth had no such person. Of course, if anyone were in his life, it would be someone like Mace Flower, a hostess on the Haunzen flight, but that was a different form of enjoyment for Kenneth.

When things with his unit settled down, and as soon as the Haunzen returned to Hong Kong, he called her apartment. Of course, getting ahold of such a phone number was a simple matter for someone in his position.

When he got her answering machine, he learned she would be in Hong Kong for a while, so he left a message with his phone number. But, of course, something like that may also have been as silly and foolish as agreeing to courier Gigi's suitcase.

If she thought the call was from some foolish man and forgot about it, it would be a bit humiliating, but it wouldn't matter much in the grand scheme of things. But, if Mace called back and said that she wanted to see him, then that in itself would be a win in Kenneth's book.

Ever since the possibility of being involved in combat reared its head, those lecherous cravings that had lain dormant within Kenneth were suddenly laid bare.

Given the nature of Kenneth's inappropriate urges, Mace, being too young, may have been of little assistance and potentially a burden to him. However, Gigi would have presented an even greater challenge.

This girl was a veritable enigma with an otherworldly quality that couldn't be denied - a touch of superstition that added to her mystique.

Just sitting next to Gigi gave Kenneth a feeling of joy, as if he always had her by his side.

Though the thought of being intimate with her filled him with a primal desire, Kenneth knew it wasn't worth the risk of shoving the table aside and defiling her, for he feared that such an act might anger the fates and bring upon him a tide of misfortune.

"Gigi ..."

"What is it?"

"You said something earlier that piqued my interest..."

"What? You mean about escorting the cabinet members?"

Hearing those words from her, Kenneth knew deep down inside that her intuition was truly amazing.

That was all Kenneth had to say right now.

He could have veered the conversation off in any number of directions, like "the cottage maid seems like a nice person," but Gigi was not like that.

Though he hadn't intended to test her abilities, he couldn't help but feel a sense of nervous excitement as he probed her intellect.

"Uh, yeah. Why did you feel that way? I wasn't trying to make a point about escorting the Cabinet members, you know?" he said, trying to keep his tone casual.

"You are so difficult. You know that? When did you become so serious?"

"Me, serious?" he asked before laughing, "Well, maybe I have. During my time in space, I was involved in the development of mobile suits. Although there were technicians responsible for managing the process, their role was limited to dealing with the finished product. However, since arriving here, I've come to realize that our allies aren't just cogs in a military machine but

flawed individuals like everyone else. And our enemies are people too. It makes me nervous to think about interacting with other people in this way."

"Hmm, I see. So it's tough when you get into a leadership position."

"Yes, exactly. Exactly that."

Kenneth mimicked Gigi's nodding and breathing patterns to show his agreement, but no one could give him a definitive answer.

"I don't know. It's a woman's intuition... think of it that way."

"That's what I'm curious about. Where does that intuition come from?"

"Well, I'd like to know that myself. Male reasoning can often be unilateral in nature, making it difficult for women to fully comprehend."

"Really? So this thing that men have ... you want to know where it comes from?"

"Yeah."

Gigi's response caught Kenneth off guard, leaving him staring at her profile. He wondered if her skillful way with words came from her experience as a mistress.

Seeing Gigi's blue eyes from the side, they appeared to be reflecting nothing, while the spectacle of greenery rushing by in the distance looked as if it could swallow up her profile.

"I'm at a loss for words. It's difficult to articulate something that is ingrained within me."

"Indeed, precisely. When I say my heart aches with loneliness, I can't fathom the reasoning behind it."

Gigi glanced mischievously at Kenneth and said, "Hey, can you tell me Hathaway Noa's address?"

"Of course. Are you planning on paying him a visit?"

Kenneth had already promised to do so, and he pulled out a note he had prepared earlier from his pocket.

"Huh. Is the location accessible by land from here?"

"Are you kidding? From here and onward towards the south, it's a string of islands until you reach Australia. There are no connecting land masses to be found. That's why it's messing with my intuition." Kenneth replied.

"So, if it's in Australia, it's okay?"

"Even if there were a landmass connecting to it, Australia has been a continent that's been difficult for people to carve out a living since the old century, right? It's different from a space colony."

"That's true. The closed environment of the space colonies might have narrowed human intellect, but the same thing would have happened on Earth. I feel that gravity is a really heavy burden on me. So the fact that humanity thought that venturing out into space was a necessity is something that I feel is a good thing."

Gigi had casually shifted the focus of their conversation, unaware of the change herself. Kenneth realized that she wanted to discuss this, as she had likely been left alone for some time.

"That's true. Humankind's cerebral cortex has significantly heightened since their time on Earth. With a bit more training in space, perhaps all of humanity could have evolved into Newtypes."

"Yeah... Newtypes... evolved humans... they really exist?"

"They do. Some people don't just keep the enlightenment they've attained to themselves but have the power to share it with those around them..."

"So that's what the Newtypes are! I guess you're a man of religion, aren't you, Captain?"

"Come on. I would never allow myself to be confined by the dogma of religion. It's not about religion. It's like something that humans have always possessed. I'm not sure how to phrase it, it's like this capacity or nature that they have."

"Ah, I see. That's truly remarkable, Captain. But, may I ask if you possess such profound thinking abilities, why do you resort to violence?"

"Violence?"

The word made Kenneth uneasy, stirring something deep within him.

"I suppose if I had to phrase it differently, I could also say that you have this instantaneous power."

"I appreciate your kind words. But, perhaps it's frustration that plagues us miserable humans, trapped by our physical bodies and emotions, unable to free ourselves from worldly desires and concerns... after all, we are Oldtypes. That's why we're so restless and impatient," Kenneth replied.

"So that includes Mafty?"

"Most likely, yes."

Kenneth pondered the equation that equated Mafty with Hathaway. He shook his head and dismissed the thought with a smile.

As the car passed through the base's gate, the security guards saluted them before they proceeded to the apron. From there, Gigi boarded the Big Carrier transport plane, which belonged to the Circe unit, and headed for Hong Kong.

Her fellow passengers consisted of a few bureaucrats who were probably flying to Hong Kong to make preliminary arrangements for the cabinet meeting, but there were none that Gigi could recognize.

And so, with a cold countenance, she adopted the guise of any other nondescript military personnel. But, aboard the transport, Gigi could help but overhear their conversations.

And then, she caught wind of the name of a city: Adelaide.

Chapter 08

Apartment

As Gigi Andalucia set foot in the bustling Hong Kong airport, she seamlessly sidestepped the assembly of officials who had joined her on the journey. Instead, a youthful Ensign from the Circe Unit took possession of her luggage, leading her toward the airport's atrium.

"Does it wear on you, serving under a rigid commanding officer?"

"No, I've always thought the military was like this, so Captain Sleg's approach doesn't bother me."

The affable Ensign accompanied Gigi until she was safely ensconced within the luxurious limousine, cautioning her to remain vigilant as the metropolis was teeming with illegal residents.

"In this city, your whereabouts and limousine access are seen as privileged activities. I suggest tipping the chauffeur upfront, lest you find yourself swindled."

"Would that hold true even if someone like you makes the request?"

The Federation government's crackdown in this region has had a severe impact on the common people, fueling their aggression. Retaliation against the privileged class, including the use of Manhunters, is commonplace.

"Thank you. That's some good advice."

"Should you require assistance, please dial the number on this card."

With a courteous farewell, the Ensign watched Gigi depart. He needed to return to the airport promptly to retrieve three esteemed ministers and Mace Flower, who would be joining them on their trip to Davao.

Mace, initially planning a leisurely vacation in Hong Kong after a work stint on the Haunzen, found herself entrusted with the responsibility of hosting these ministers after a call from Kenneth. Embracing the unexpected turn of events, Mace chose to journey to Davao, considering it a welcome diversion.

Oblivious to these developments, Gigi marveled at the surprisingly vibrant urban landscape adorned with time-worn structures reminiscent of bygone eras.

"Yet, it pales in comparison to the glory days of the previous century."

The limousine chauffeur offered this insight.

Gigi noticed the impeccably maintained road ascending the mountain as they exited the city.

"It's remarkable how well-kept this road is, surrounded by nature; it rivals even a space colony."

"Indeed, the Federation government's recent Earth-centric initiatives have been quite impactful. A century has passed since the dawn of the Universal Century. Yet, as Earth's pollution is alleviated, influential Federation officials have established these luxurious urban enclaves for their own benefit..."

Realizing Gigi's destination lay within one such posh neighborhood, the driver abruptly halted his commentary.

"Don't worry. I'm not of that social echelon. I'm merely a humble mistress."

Gigi proclaimed, loud enough for her voice to traverse the plastic barrier separating the driver's seat from the cabin.

Their eyes met in the rearview mirror.

"Hahaha! You have a knack for defusing delicate situations. Thank you. Your words have put me at ease."

Ascending to a notable elevation, the limousine came to a halt before an elegant apartment complex.

A steely-eyed security officer at the entrance inquired the driver about the identity of the cabin's occupant.

"Gigi Andalucia. I presume you were informed of my arrival, correct?"

Gigi addressed the guard, keeping the window merely halfway open.

There are moments when an air of arrogance and aloofness proves efficacious, and this was one such instance.

Naturally, this tactic had been imparted to her by her benefactor, Count Cardias Boundenwooden.

"Ah, yes! We were worried since you took so long to arrive."

"I came down on the Haunzen."

"Oh, of course! That must have been quite an ordeal. Kindly wait a moment."

As the guard retreated within the entrance, the sturdy main gate shutter began its gradual ascent.

The choice to forgo wireless or optical sensors signaled prestige, signifying that someone could be employed around the clock to oversee the gate.

Moreover, it had the added advantage of creating jobs.

In contrast to earlier times, the capability to produce food, living spaces, and daily necessities with a significantly reduced labor force led to a surge in individuals with no work obligations. However, this development did not yield positive outcomes.

As evidenced by the consequences of implementing an entirely welfare-focused society, it became clear that people require exceptional talent and determination to lead fulfilling lives while engaging in leisure all their days.

To unconditionally live in tranquility, an individual must possess an inherently composed disposition suited for such a lifestyle or exhibit formidable resolve.

Lacking these attributes, individuals would succumb to corruption.

A perfect example of this would be the well-intentioned welfare policies for the minority ethnic groups once scattered across the planet. The protection policies that ensured sustenance until their final days not only hindered successful assimilation but also stripped them of their capacity to

preserve their cultural legacy. Once these minority groups no longer encountered adversity, they relinquished the fight for survival, forsaking their ethnic pride and customs.

The ultimate consequence was the extinction of these ethnicities.

Mankind had to shoulder colossal burdens to acknowledge the existence of seemingly benevolent abandonment policies.

Finally, in the Universal Century, as the mixing of ethnicities took place, society began to restrict welfare policies solely to the most defenseless and reevaluate the importance of work in preserving their identities. This reassessment solidified the understanding that labor was indispensable for upholding one's identity.

"The view will be magnificent when we reach the top floor."

"I'd certainly hope so, or else there's no point coming to a place like this."

"Of course."

With an enigmatic, faintly dark smile characteristic of East Asians, the concierge wheeled Gigi's suitcase and directed her toward a crimson door.

"We left the bare minimum tasks, such as making the bed, but should you require any additional items, we can promptly contact a supplier."

The concierge unlocked the wooden red door using two cylinder locks. These locks were considered safe due to their mechanical nature.

The ornately engraved red door radiated an air of elegance without ostentation. Beyond it, a winding staircase greeted them at the entrance, accompanied by a compact elevator to the left.

"It's wheelchair accessible, right?"

"The elevator? Of course."

"Please call the interior and furniture suppliers immediately. I'd like to make some changes."

Gigi surveyed the living room with a commanding view of the heart of Hong Kong, the dining room, and the main bedroom before giving the order.

"As you wish, ma'am."

Gigi thought she could make do with the standard kitchenware and dining set in the kitchen downstairs, but she decided that the upper floor needed an urgent makeover.

"Please call the kitchenware supplier as well."

"Of course, ma'am."

"May I arrange meal deliveries for tonight and tomorrow?"

"Most items can be ordered upon request. Oh, and if any of the temporary furniture appeals to you, you're welcome to purchase it."

The concierge referred to the complete living room ensemble, dining set, and bed in the main bedroom.

"I see..."

Gigi returned to the living room and glanced at the thick catalogs on the table. Despite sensing an atmosphere of collusion between the concierge and the various suppliers, she requested arrangements and then sent them away.

By evening, she had negotiated markdowns with numerous suppliers and placed orders for wallpaper replacement in one chamber and new draperies. In truth, procuring top-notch items demanded time and careful attention to myriad details.

Gigi's inability to fully commit to this task felt like a disservice to the Count, but haste was necessary.

It was precisely this facet of Gigi that Count Cardias Boundenwooden prized: her capacity to assume the role of a particular social stratum in situations like this.

In other words, her aptitude for identifying and organizing tasteful, high-quality products earned her the admiration of those in her company.

Her duties spanned from price negotiation to overseeing the craftsmen.

Hours passed in the blink of an eye, and a middle-aged Chinese woman employed by the apartment building delivered Gigi's dinner.

As Gigi accepted the tray with her meal, the woman unapologetically extended her hand, seeking a gratuity.

Gigi bristled at the woman's surly demeanor, the exact kind of attitude the Count detested.

While giving her a tip, Gigi said, "Don't always expect a tip, okay? With that attitude, you'll be asked to leave."

The woman uttered nothing, merely scoffing dismissively.

Resolved to let her go, Gigi sent the woman on her way and promptly contacted the concierge, communicating her decision.

"I'll cover her severance. How much?"

Stunned by Gigi's assertiveness, the concierge proposed a substantial amount, adding that it would suffice for the woman to reside in the city for half a year.

"Mr. Hou? Starting tomorrow, please employ someone with a distinct surname from yours. Otherwise, you might be the next one asked to leave."

He objected, arguing that Chinese surnames were limited in number and locating someone would be challenging.

"Chinese surnames outnumber Korean ones, correct? Moreover, this city should host a diverse population, including individuals of Japanese or Southeast Asian origin."

At Gigi's insistence, the concierge vowed to adhere to her request.

This, too, was an aspect of Gigi's role.

Gigi dined alone in the spacious dining room under ridiculously bright lighting, looking down at the seedy Hong Kong nightscape, a far cry from a glittering diamond.

Exhausted, she then perused the hefty catalog before her, inputting a list of furnishings to order the following day on her computer and placing orders via phone lines where feasible.

"..."

Finally, the time came when she could completely undress.

Gigi used the main bathroom, recalling Hathaway Noa's reaction when he saw her naked.

She wouldn't have minded the pre-arranged amenities here if she pretended to be staying at a hotel.

"Hathaway..."

As Gigi murmured his name several times, she envisioned him presently mired in dirty work.

She also knew that tonight might be the only time she could use such a splendid bathtub.

"How delightful. Yes!"

Thus, Gigi nestled in a tiny corner of the apartment's double bed and slept in solitude.



Chapter 09

Underwear on the Bed

As the first rays of dawn illuminated the horizon, Hathaway and his team made their way back to the Valiant. Meanwhile, Gawman and his team ventured farther south to rendezvous with the Ceelack.

"Keria was dispatched to Darwin, right?"

"Yeah, on a small jet."

The topic of Keria lingered heavily in Hathaway's mind, but the invigorating breeze slipping through his slightly open flight suit provided a modicum of relief.

"Who's the pilot?"

"The captain wasn't exactly happy about it, but he assigned Julia Suga to the task. So they're getting everything set up for her arrival in Darwin."

"I see..."

The two-seater jet was a sleek civilian sports model, its wings designed to fold and detach for easy storage on the vessel. However, its range was limited, just enough to reach Darwin from their current location. It seemed that Keria and Julia, who weren't known for getting along, had taken the risk of flying in such a small craft.

Hathaway felt a pang of guilt, realizing that his relief at their departure eclipsed his concern for their safety.

"After experiencing the stench of death, am I really going to worry about Keria?"

Hathaway was repulsed by how readily his heart wavered amidst such seemingly inconsequential matters.

"Clearly, I have much to work on," he mused.

"My calling is greater – to leave an indelible mark on this world, to transform it. Gigi was supposed to be the means to achieve it..."

Despite his weariness of the youthful atmosphere that seemed to doubt his words, Hathaway couldn't help but be drawn to Gigi's allure. This facet left a sour note in his heart.

"I must break free from these corporeal and emotional yearnings, or salvation will remain beyond my reach."

Tormented by his thoughts, he sought solace from the arid wind in the musty confines of the cabin.

Ever since assuming the identity of Mafty, Hathaway had grown markedly introspective, becoming well-acquainted with his innermost thoughts.

Consequently, he could somewhat set aside his concerns about Keria. Nonetheless, Gigi's presence continued to unsettle his heart.

"Through Gigi, I was able to learn about my enemy Kenneth... That revelation allowed me more time to strategize against the Circe Unit."

He tried to rationalize his fixation on Gigi with such trivial justifications.

"But Davao wants solid evidence that Adelaide is their target, and they also need to communicate with the support troops deployed on the continent. That's why they sent Keria."

Iram Masam attempted to empathize with Hathaway's somber mood, gesturing to the chart spread across the cramped cabin's desk.

"Why not leave that to our contact hiding in Darwin?" Hathaway inquired, his words veiling his true contemplations while rummaging through the refrigerator.

"It's not that simple. Remember Fabio of the Oenbelli Army that you mentioned? Their movements might prove beneficial to us. In that case, we need to send someone well-versed in our situation."

"Right."

Hathaway retrieved bacon and a hunk of broccoli from the fridge and arranged them on the desk beneath the porthole.

"Since that incident, radio communications among Davao, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou have grown increasingly conspicuous. Plus, numerous cargo planes are also flying south. Still, it remains plausible that both are mere distractions."

Masam indicated the movements of the Circe Unit's suits notated on the chart.

"But I don't think the Circe Unit has that much leeway either," Hathaway said, biting into a bacon-stuffed bread as he traced their future route on the chart.

"True, but Kenneth Sleg's arrival has made Davao's actions far more dynamic compared to Kimberley Hayman. There's no denying he's a formidable contender," Masam observed.

"Hmm... interesting," Hathaway responded, gratified by such a valuation of an adversary he recognized.

Affability alone doesn't make someone a comrade. Only when they possess the corresponding expertise will they become a valuable ally worthy of boasting about. And in the case of an enemy who challenges them with a Gundam, mediocrity isn't an option.

Hathaway believed that was the ethos shared by pilots and warriors he had met on the battlefield.

Defeating the weak doesn't make one a warrior nor a soldier.

Moreover, it doesn't make one a pilot, a knight, or a samurai.

"Will there be some supplies at Bynoe Harbour?"

"Yeah, that's the plan. As for the matters at Ayers Rock and Gawler, Keria should be able to handle them, right?"

Hearing Masam's evaluation, Hathaway slipped into his sweltering bed as the sun's relentless rays once again inundated the space.

On that same morning, Gigi, still groggy from sleep, realized she needed to contact Hathaway.

"Ah...!"

Sunlight filtered through the curtains she loathed, casting a surprisingly beautiful glow.

As she stretched her muscles, Gigi felt increasingly confident in her decision. Then, swiftly changing into her running attire, she hurried out of her apartment.

The on-duty security guard was bewildered by her sudden departure, but he didn't seem to suspect anything.

Gigi dreaded the thought of running uphill back to her apartment, but she had no choice but to make her way down to the city to find a payphone. She had a hunch that Kenneth might be tapping her phone, so she couldn't risk making the call from her apartment.

After running downhill for a while, Gigi finally came across a few phone booths on a street lined with apartments.

"May I speak with Hathaway Noah?"

"I'm afraid he isn't available at the moment. He's out for an internship."

The somber voice of an older man, transmitted through the undersea cable, carried an air of mystique.

Gigi, however, was surprised that the phone number for Hathaway's residence, provided by Kenneth, was accurate.

She couldn't afford any careless communication.

"Would this happen to be Professor Amada Mansan?"

"Who might this be?"

"My name is Gigi Andalusia."

"Hathaway told me about you. What can I do for you?"

The initially apprehensive voice softened somewhat but remained cautious.

"Can you pass along a message? Ask him if we can have our next date in Adelaide?"

"A date in Adelaide? That's rather unexpected."

"We agreed on it yesterday. We couldn't settle on a spot in Davao, so when I asked Kenneth for advice, he gave me this phone number, and that's how we decided. Would you please pass that along?"

Gigi was as nervous as if she were calling the father of a lover she had never met before.

"Where are you now?"

"I'm in Hong Kong. I really wanted to go visit you, but Hathaway told me you're a scary person..."

Gigi made this remark in an attempt to gauge the professor's response.

"I'd have to ask him about that. His work takes him to areas without phone service, so there's not much I can do unless he reaches out to me."

"You know, I'm still trying to determine my own position in all this. I might even find myself at Kenneth's place at some point..."

"Kenneth? Ah... He's quite busy, isn't he?"

"That's right. I have quite a few admirers, don't I? But I'm glad I could connect with you. May I call you again?"

Despite feeling a bit sheepish about highlighting her achievements to an older individual who seemed so ordinary, there was no other way to keep the conversation light.

"Not at all, but I'm not always here either..."

"Oh, really? Well, I'm glad I could talk to you today, at least."

Gigi said a silent prayer, hoping there was no one eavesdropping on the call, as she slowly jogged back up the hill.

News of the mass killings in Davao was reported on the local cable TV news that afternoon, just as the furniture Gigi had ordered was being delivered to her apartment.

The footage only showed a few bloodstained bodies lying on Davao's main street, with fleeting glimpses of the Circe Unit and the special police force known as Man-Hunters in the background. There was no indication that they had obstructed the camera.

However, the footage itself was brief.

"What's going on?"

Gigi doubted the credibility of the news while supervising the furniture arrangement, but she couldn't dismiss it as a lie.

The announcer reported that over 500 arrests and more than 100 deaths had occurred in a crackdown on dissidents led by the Circe Unit.

By evening, the distasteful room decor was hastily completed, and furniture was moved in.

Once the work was finished, Gigi dined alone on the veranda.

Now, the minimum preparations were completed to welcome the apartment's owner, who would likely arrive in two weeks.

However, she couldn't help but regret taking shortcuts.

More than anything, there was the considerable task of imbuing the place with the scent of everyday life for the elderly man who disliked the restlessness of being surrounded by new things. But Gigi couldn't do that now.

"If only I could return before the Count arrives, I would do what's lacking..."

Despite this thought, she knew she probably wouldn't return here.

That news segment aired only once.

Gigi went to sleep feeling uneasy.

Despite their amicable nature towards her, Captain Sleg and Hathaway were frequent visitors to her dreams, making appearances only to vanish just as quickly.

The following day, Gigi saw that her casual attire from the day before was somewhat strewn about the room. She also set up a small photo of herself and Cardias Bowndenwood in an acrylic frame on the living room table, alongside a note that she had started writing but had not yet finished.

She set timers for some lamps to turn on in the evening and ensured the bathtub was filled with hot water each night.

She wore several expensive accessories to pawn off but still felt she owed an apology to the Count.

"I'm sorry... I just want to live a little--"

Although she tried saying this, it didn't change the frustrating reality.

Furthermore, she checked her bank account linked to her debit card because she felt she needed funds available for emergencies.

"..."

After mulling it over for a while, she decided that she could return the money to the Count once the need was gone. Gigi kept her personal debit card but stashed the card for the joint account she shared with the Count, which was intended for communal expenses, in the bedside table drawer.

After changing out of her clothes, she scattered her small undergarments on the bedcover and carefully arranged them to look more natural.

A camisole and panties adorned with pink and slightly darker pink lace...

Socks, jeans, and a long-sleeved T-shirt were carelessly strewn beneath the bed.

"..."

Beside the pillow lay the black rubber band she had used to tie her blonde hair.

Gigi shed tears as she resigned herself to the fate that had led her to this point, convincing herself that this would be her final parting gift.

"The Count is also a victim in all of this..."

With nothing but a shoulder bag in tow, Gigi set foot on the road as evening began to fall.

When the guard and concierge expressed concern about her not having a car, she laughed and made her way down the hill.

"Adieu, my benefactor! I might be walking to my demise."

As Gigi contemplated those words, the sunlight beat down upon her, reminiscent of the sweltering afternoon heat.

Chapter 10

Approach Walk

The Valiant effortlessly maneuvered through the tight passageway separating Bathurst and Melville Islands before charting a southerly course towards Bynoe Harbour, situated off Darwin's coast.

Keria Dace and Julia Suga were scheduled to touch down in Darwin yesterday in a light aircraft camouflaged as a civilian plane. However, they would remain unreachable until it was certain that the Valiant, concealed amidst Bynoe Harbour's complex shoreline, was able to secure its next resupply. Given the increased activity of Kenneth's Circe Unit, engaging in any unnecessary communication posed a risk.

"Word from the professor?"

"Yes. If the decryption is accurate, a call from Gigi reveals that even Kenneth has alluded to a meeting taking place in Adelaide."

"Gigi? Oh... From her, huh..."

As Hathaway gazed at the handwritten note, he felt a pang in his heart.

Tears might have welled up in his eyes if the note hadn't been scribbled in Chachai Coleman's messy handwriting.

A soothing breeze wafted in through the Captain's cabin's open porthole.

"Will things work out?"

Knowing that the Captain's question carried various implications, Hathaway replied, "In the sense that her mood tends to fluctuate quite frequently, she appears to be an extraordinary young woman."

Contemplating how revitalizing a good night's sleep could be even amidst sweltering heat, Hathaway absentmindedly rubbed his grimy, perspiration-soaked chest.

"Is that so?"

Captain Wedge exhibited no signs of empathizing with Hathaway's feigned indifference.

"Do you know her? Gigi?"

"Girls like Gigi aren't exactly uncommon."

The Captain's comment slightly wounded Hathaway's pride.

He longed for those he knew to be exceptional. Being characterized so plainly made him feel belittled.

"I see..."

When Hathaway handed the message back to the Captain, who burned it with his lighter, a subtle warmth permeated the tabletop.

"Yes?"

The Captain answered a knock at the door, and Iram Masam entered the room.

Hathaway uttered the first thought that crossed his mind to lift his spirits.

"There's an interesting possibility. Fabio Rivera and his crew might be advancing into Bynoe Harbour."

Captain Wedge looked at Hathaway with amusement and asked, "How do they interpret the movements of the Circe Unit transport aircraft from the day before yesterday and the day after?"

"They likely view it as a ruse by the Circe Unit to keep Fabio and his associates confined to the continent. In that respect, Fabio and his men are quite cunning."

Masam flashed a toothy grin and said, "Since Hathaway's arrival in Davao, communication between Davao and Hong Kong has increased, providing grounds to believe that the Federation government's cabinet meeting shifted to Guangzhou."

"Besides, Hundley Yeoksan of the Criminal Organization is a shrewd man. It was probably his and Kenneth's handiwork to mobilize the Man-Hunters."

"So, today or tomorrow, all the ministers will move to Adelaide."

"Right. How many were there in Hong Kong?"

"Roughly twelve. A flight from South America is inbound, and transport forces have been reinforced."

"What about the Circe's mobile suit forces?"

"We're uncertain, but it appears a few mobile suits from the European front were also deployed. Perhaps eight?"

Masam checked the data on his handheld computer.

"And on our side?"

"If all goes well, we'll get five more in Gawler."

"It's a relief, but the enemy's insistence on Adelaide raises questions about their true intentions for holding the cabinet meeting there."

Captain Wedge, as expected, brought the discussion back to the main issue.

"The Federation government aims to annihilate us by employing the Circe Unit and the Criminal Police Organization. They're under the impression they're spearheading the operation, hence the choice of Adelaide."

Hathaway felt assured in his analysis, having observed the petty-bourgeois mindset of the ministers aboard the Haunzen.

"Is it really that simple?"

"Yes, they regard Adelaide as a forward base and, more importantly, an optimal site for the Federation government's future capital."

"I don't get it... Their way of thinking seems narrow-minded."

"That's precisely why we're striving to overthrow the Federation government, right?"

As the Captain grumbled, Masam chuckled before the intercom chimed.

"What is it? Hatha? Yes, he's here... Alright, the pilots are all assembled."

The Captain relayed the information to Hathaway and Masam.

Hathaway let Masam leave the Captain's room first, then asked the Captain, "Is Gigi's personality really that common?"

"I can't say for certain. That's merely what Emerald and Mihesha mentioned."

"Mihessia is the hypersensitive type. So her judgment isn't dependable."

Hathaway sought to dismiss the assertion, but in truth, Mihessia Hence's character assessments were quite accurate.

"Never mind..."

Hathaway said as he climbed the dimly lit ladder.

"This is our strategy for resupplying at Bynoe Harbour."

Masam unveiled the original plan to Hathaway, primarily consisting of provisions to augment the Base Jabber's capabilities and a roster of replacement suits.

"Excellent. If you believe anything is missing, voice your concerns now. We must relay a message to Lodoicea before entering the bay. Otherwise, we risk revealing Valiant's position to our adversaries," Hathaway instructed, surveying the pilots' Golf, Emerald, Hara, and Rodd. He asked the Base Jabber's crew to examine the list too.

"So there are no reinforcements for us on the continent?"

"That's an unrealistic expectation."

Reluctantly, Hathaway confirmed Emerald's suspicion.

Although they had been seeking assistance from Quack Salvor, it wasn't a problem easily resolved.

"But if there are supplies for the Base Jabbers, maybe they brought new people we don't know about," suggested Civet, Captain of the 2 Galcezon.

"Should we pray to the heavens for that?"

"It wouldn't hurt," Golf chimed in.

Regardless, they had support to relocate all mobile suits to Adelaide. If that happened, all they had to do was move from Bynoe Harbour to Adelaide without being caught in the Circe Unit's net.

"Where will we rendezvous with Gawman and his team from the Ceelack?"

"We can't link up until we reach Gawler, but there seems to be a surge in mobile suits."

"Wow! Mafty can't be underestimated either."

In his enthusiasm, Raymond playfully tapped Emerald's backside, prompting her to swing her hips in response.

"..."

Hathaway envied their lightheartedness, a feeling he realized was his own selfishness. Without Mafty or Gigi, he could have maintained a better relationship with Keria.

His determination to shoulder the weight of this reality was the catalyst for everything.

"The issue is that this critical juncture lies close to Alice Springs, an Earth Federation Forces supply point. With the right timing, we can strike the Circe Unit's vanguard," Hathaway explained.

"That also means we might be the ones taking the hit."

Captain Hendrix of the 3rd Galsezon chuckled at Hathaway's attempt to reassure them.

"Don't remind us. We lack the resources to deploy extensive reconnaissance..."

"Hehehe!"

With no other choice, they all laughed off the concern.

"I apologize, but our options are simple: reach Adelaide or face defeat. Please endure."

"What's the reward?"

"None. Merely the self-satisfaction that we did our best."

"That's a tough break..."

Emerald joked, causing young pilots Drab Reid and Belantes Swecken to tense up.

"Emme, cut it out. Drab and Belantes don't seem to find it funny."

As Civet Anhern playfully patted the young pilots' backsides, both Drab and Belantes flushed.

"It's not like that."

"We're prepared for anything."

"Good, that's a good mindset. Now, let's carefully consider the situation to dispel any doubts you may have," Hathaway said as he checked the supply and repair status of the suits and delved into the explanation of the plan for being on alert in case of a rendezvous with the supply unit.

After securing the Penelope to the Kessaria's deck, Lane Aim found himself staring at a bewildering sight.

"What in the world is going through the Captain's mind!?"

While Lane understood that those in positions of authority deserved certain privileges and power, there had to be boundaries.

This was particularly true for Lane, who had been compelled to take Gawman Nobile, a member of Mafty, hostage during their previous mission. The scene before him was utterly distasteful.

Kenneth had brought a civilian girl to the base of the control tower. It wasn't an issue that there were female members in the Circe Unit or that the girl was a woman. The problem was that the girl was a civilian, and the sight of Kenneth's relaxed face from a distance, a riding whip tucked under his arm, looked like nothing more than a casual date.

"Quite a change from the Captain's usual company of girls, isn't it?"

Stepping out of the Penelope's cockpit, Lane posed the question to the Kessaria's bridge crew below.

"No, she's different."

Hearing the crew member's mocking tone towards Kenneth, Lane felt reassured that it wasn't just his own bias fueling his resentment towards the Captain.

"Can you believe the audacity of someone goofing around with a kid in front of their men when they're gearing up for a mission? What's that all about, huh?"

As the crew member spoke, Lane made his way down to the Kessaria's bridge and settled into a seat beside him.

The crew member handed Lane the binoculars he had been using.

"Hmm..."

Without hesitation, Lane trained the binoculars on the girl standing next to Kenneth.

"Gigi? That was her name, right?"

He realized she was the girl Kenneth had been leading around the unit just days earlier.

He had seen her before in passing but had assumed she was a relative of Captain Sleg.

However, Gigi had gained a reputation among the unit members as the "Captain's lucky charm."

She didn't seem to be his mistress, nor did they have a father-daughter relationship.

"..."

As Lane observed Gigi's blonde hair sparkle in the sun through the binoculars, he wondered why Kenneth trusted her and suddenly felt that she might be connected to him in some way.

This newfound sense of kinship was an intriguing intuition.

He hadn't experienced that feeling with the tall, blonde girl Kenneth had been with the day before.

If comparing blondes, Mace Flower seemed more beautiful to Lane, and he felt she was within the appropriate age range to be a lover.

However, he didn't sense a connection with Gigi.

It wasn't a romantic relationship, but something else... What could it be?
Lane couldn't help but ask himself.

Consequently, Lane spent too much time peering through the binoculars, prompting the crew member who had lent them to reclaim them.

"She's quite a looker, isn't she? Could she be the Captain's illegitimate daughter?"

"They don't resemble each other."

Lane offered a wry smile and secured his seatbelt.

"Unit Eight, acknowledged! Prepare for launch!"

The Captain's voice echoed through the Kessaria's bridge.

Transporting the Minovsky Craft-equipped Penelope to the continent aboard the Kessaria was Kenneth's directive, allowing the pilot some respite before Lane assumed control of it from then on.

In this regard, Kenneth's thoughtfulness seemed well-placed.

Even as the Man-Hunters were incorporated under the command of the Circe Unit, keeping Kenneth incredibly occupied, he exhibited a deft balance of strictness and leniency with the mobile suit squad members under his direct supervision.

From the standpoint of those being guided, there was no dissatisfaction. Perhaps that explained it.

Even though the story of Kenneth bringing in an enigmatic woman named Mace was amusingly shared among the squad members, there was no backlash against it.

However, according to a reliable source, Lieutenant Ray Lagoid, the mundane story that Mace was a stewardess on the Haunzen and had a verified background was dismissed. Instead, it was believed that Mace was an illegal resident living in Hong Kong and a spy sent by Mafty to gather information from Kenneth.

In front of Lane's Kessaria Unit Eight, seven Kessarias, each carrying two Gustav Karls, flew in a vertical formation. When they reached an altitude of 5,000, they divided into pairs and fanned out left and right, heading south while undertaking reconnaissance maneuvers.

The same was true for the following Big Carrier; patrol duties were assigned to all.

"The annihilation of the Kimberley Unit confirms that Mafty's activities in the Oenbelli region have escalated. There must be a Mafty support base. Find it!"

Kenneth's stern nature was evident in giving such orders, but without high-performance military reconnaissance satellites like those at the end of the previous century, it was only logical to depend on human observation.

The deep blue sky and the towering, pure white pillars of clouds stretched out before them.

Amidst that panorama, Lane's Kessaria flew alongside Unit Seven, heading straight for the Australian continent.

Chapter 11

Girl and Woman

"The place was terrible, which is why I came back. The Count doesn't matter to me anymore."

Gigi's sudden appearance during the frenzied preparations for the unit's deployment to Australia left even the unflappable Kenneth at a loss for words.

As the coordinator for the special police under the jurisdiction of Criminal Police Chief Hundley Yeoksan in Davao, Kenneth was busy preparing defenses for the Adelaide Conference, transporting barrier equipment to Adelaide, and conducting a diversionary operation in Davao. Just as he was contemplating his next move, Mace Flower arrived on the same flight as the ministers from Hong Kong, with Gigi in tow, who had been expelled from the base.

Despite his tough exterior, Kenneth couldn't help feeling worn out. "I get it, but I can't deal with you right now," he said.

"Are you headed to Adelaide?" Gigi asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I guess I'll lay low at Hathaway's place then. The Count won't come all the way to Menado to find me, will he?"

"Maybe," Kenneth replied, unsure.

Although he had no choice but to bring her to his office, Kenneth was troubled by her persistence. "How about this? Menado is on the way. You could come with me on the carrier," he suggested.

"Wow, I didn't know that geographically," Gigi replied.

"Where did you leave your luggage?" Kenneth asked as he climbed the stairs to his office, idly swinging his riding crop. Oblivious to the pleasing sound it made, he didn't notice the slight pause in Gigi's response.

"I found a luggage storage place in Hong Kong. It's still there," Gigi said.

"Would you like me to have it sent over? You have the baggage tag, don't you?"

"I'm not sure. If Hathaway gets mad, I might have to go back to Hong Kong."

"If that happens, come to me. We'll figure something out."

"But I don't want to go to Davao. Something scary happened there yesterday."

"That was an isolated incident. There won't be any more occurrences. The Adelaide Conference won't last forever either."

Kenneth introduced Gigi to the orderly who opened the office door.

"Hello."

The guard seemed puzzled by Gigi's innocent greeting and carefree nod.

"...?"

Kenneth, who had entered the room before the soldier, glanced at Gigi as he exchanged a couple of words with the female secretary.

"Should I step out?" she asked, wondering if it had to do with military matters.

"Are you leaving?" asked a woman as the door to the office in the back opened, revealing the tall figure of Mace Flower.

"Oh... there was confidential information. Captain, I'll just find something to do myself."

Gigi, who immediately recognized Mace, said this not in a servile manner.

"Huh? No, you're fine."

"But..."

"Gigi Andalusia, right?" Mace inquired with an alluring smile that sent shivers down Gigi's spine, reminding her of the lingering scent after a passionate encounter.

While not necessarily inappropriate for adults, Gigi felt uneasy that Kenneth was involved. It seemed as though Mace and Kenneth were too close, and Gigi felt compelled to defy Kenneth, who appeared to be compromising in this situation.

"Yes... I've been relying too much on the Captain... Hehehe... You know how things are," Gigi replied vaguely, and Mace seemed to understand. Gigi also resented Mace's patronizing demeanor and resolved to push her away.

"Shall we head out, Captain?"

"Oh, yes. I'm taking Gigi part of the way. Hold tight a bit."

"Of course."

As Kenneth retreated into his office, Mace and Gigi sat down on the sofa in front of the secretary. Mace motioned for Gigi to take a seat.

"Have you been in Davao all this time?"

"No, I just returned from Hong Kong today..."

"Oh, so I got here before you. I was accompanying some important people from Hong Kong and was sent back to Davao, which caused my vacation to be canceled."

"When it comes to Mafty countermeasures, the higher-ups prefer to use people they know, right?"

"You seem to be well-liked by everyone here, don't you?"

"That's what I hated. The Captain saved me from that, to be more precise."

"I see... Is it because men act like children?"

Gigi resented Mace's probing questions. She ignored what Mace was saying and continued with her own thoughts.

"I wanted to test the Captain's luck as a soldier, so I stayed by his side."

"Luck...?"

"Yes, even I want to live a normal life."

"Hmm, so that's why you're into middle-aged men?"

There was some bite in those words.

Gigi sensed that Mace was the type to prey on men.

Gigi casually leaned forward towards Mace, not minding that her lips brushed her hair, and said, "The Captain must be great in the sack, huh? I bet he even asked you for oral and anal, didn't he?"

Gigi chuckled, feeling Mace's neck twitch.

"...!"

As Mace's upper body recoiled, her left hand flew towards Gigi's cheek.

Gigi didn't dodge, and a loud slap resounded.

The secretary looked up in surprise, but seeing Gigi unbothered and gazing at Mace, whose left hand hung limply, it was unclear what had just transpired.

Without any indication of a physical altercation, it was difficult to imagine the events that had just unfolded.

Gigi, who had braced herself for the blow, bore the stinging pain that resonated through her.

"What's your deal!?" Mace demanded, her lips quivering as she glared at Gigi's reddening cheek. Then, she abruptly stood up.

"I'm leaving."

"Please do," Gigi replied, flopping heavily into the sofa.

"...!"

Just after Mace closed the door facing the hallway, Kenneth emerged from the office.

"What happened? What was that loud noise?"

"Mace said she's leaving."

"Back to Hong Kong, right?"

"Yes..."

As Gigi stood up, she turned her slapped right cheek towards Kenneth and wrapped her arm around his.

"Did you drive her away?"

"Yeah..."

"I thought so..."



"Can I replace her?"

"Well, our tastes are a bit different, I guess. I'd like to think I'm not as old as the Count yet."

Kenneth handed some notes to the secretary and led Gigi out into the hallway.

"Sorry about that... But now's not the time for her. She'd just drain your energy, Captain."

"If you say so, it must be true..."

"You can touch my butt and breasts if you want?"

"Well, I appreciate that."

Kenneth didn't hold Gigi responsible, perhaps because he shared a similar understanding with her. Instead, he might have even felt appreciative for being told he couldn't control his adult male side during the operation.

Together with Gigi, Kenneth boarded the Big Carrier.

It was the last of the three flights scheduled to depart that day.

In the cabin behind the cockpit, there were plain seats for about ten people, typical for a military aircraft. The officers who had arrived earlier seemed uncomfortable, unable to say anything when they saw Captain Sleg bringing Gigi instead of Mace.

"..."

Like on the Haunzen, Gigi was accustomed to the cold stares of people like this. She gave a faint smile and greeted the officers on her left and right while taking her seat at the rear.

Kenneth approached the cockpit after the main engine started, then returned to the cabin.

"How is it? Your first time on such a bare-bones aircraft?"

"Yes... It's nerve-wracking."

"Is that so... What do you think? Will it go well?"

"Are you talking about the whole operation? Or this transport aircraft?"

"Both, everything, really."

"I'm not a fortune-teller, you know? But, I think it'll go well. You might be able to capture something from Mafty... You might capture something from Mafty... or maybe not. It could even end up underwater."

Gigi mused, her eyes narrowing as she gazed at the shimmering concrete apron outside the window.

"Underwater? Will something sink?"

"Hmm... There might be something that would benefit the Captain."

"If that's the case, then we might have a lot to be thankful for from earlier, right? But if not, then it might not go so well?"

"Yes, that's right. Relationships between men and women can be like that..."

Gigi whispered those words into the Captain's ear, mindful of the officers in the front seats trying to eavesdrop.

"I'm glad you mentioned that. Fortune favors the bold, you know. I'm counting on you."

Kenneth patted Gigi's knee before returning to the cockpit.

Soon after, the carrier took off, joined the formation with the three following aircraft, and headed south.

"...!"

Gigi, resting her entire body on the thin seat, felt the exhaustion of the nonstop journey from Hong Kong to this aircraft.

The fact that she had acquired a ticket to Davao through a dubious route made her uneasy, all the while feeling the pressure of needing to determine her next move if Kenneth didn't meet with her. And looming over everything was the presence of Mace.

Eventually, she succumbed to sleep.

"Gigi!"

Kenneth's voice woke her up.

"I wanted to talk to you when we passed Menado, but you were sleeping so soundly that I decided not to. We're almost in Australia."

"Really?"

The window still showed nothing but the vast expanse of the sea. Gigi looked back at Kenneth, wondering what he was trying to say. He seemed pleased.

"I thought I should be the first to tell you, Gigi..."

"...!"

Gigi felt sore from sitting in the hard seat for so long.

"We sunk one of Mafty's ships. It's confirmed. It happened just as you said it would, Gigi."

"That's good, then."

Gigi didn't consider the possibility that Hathaway was on that ship.

In fact, he was, but at the time, she didn't feel that possibility at all because Kenneth was hoping for a positive development in the situation.

"Are you certain?! Captain!"

The two officers sitting in front of them stood up.

"Yes, it's not a hundred percent certain, but it's the ship we call M-3. What did they call it in Mafty's code?"

"The Valiant! Is it true!? Really?"

"Mafty's supply lines have been significantly compromised. Captain, you've made it happen!"

"Indeed, it's all thanks to the Penelope. Lieutenant Aim finally stepped up and did something that resembles actual work."

"What?! The lieutenant?!"

"Exactly. It's about time I introduce this young lady to everyone. She's the one who foresaw our success. If it weren't for this outcome, I'd have been too embarrassed to present her like this, so I've been on edge until now."

"Ah, I see... I've heard rumors, but...!"

"Gigi Andalusia, is it?"

"Well, whether you believe it or not is up to you, but as a commander, I am committed to doing everything in my power to ensure my men's survival in combat, even if it means offering prayers for their safety. Who knows, perhaps this kind of omen can give us an advantage. So, cut me some slack."

The cabin filled with voices of recognition and admiration for Gigi's prophecy, as if they had known her all along.

At that moment, Gigi was officially recognized by the Circe Unit.

Chapter 12

Departure from Darwin

Some three hours before Kenneth was transmitted news of the Valiant's watery demise, the ill-fated vessel slipped into the waters of Bynoe Harbour.

Eschewing the crumbling ruins of towns and ports from the last century, Hathaway and his crew opted for an unassuming inlet, nestled beside the bay's western boundary. The surrounding terrain, characterized by only subtle undulations, posed a challenge in concealing even a single ship, prompting the Valiant's intricate camouflage.

Having initially gone on ahead, Keria Dace and Julia Suga successfully established contact with the support forces gathered there and readied themselves to receive units from the Valiant.

Yet, the flat, marshy landscape hampered efforts to lay even a modest foundation of iron sheets, so transporting supplies from the supporting units to Galcezon was done using the Minovsky Craft Xi Gundam. The trio of Galcezon units that had arrived prior were laden with supplies, while additional mobile suit parts were brought onboard the Valiant.

The plan was for the vessel to press on southward, offering aid to machines retreating from the continent.

During the two-hour resupply operation, as Hathaway had anticipated, Fabio Rivera appeared in a helicopter with Chang Hei and Federico Martinelli.

With a sardonic grin, Hathaway greeted them, "I've been expecting you."

"I never thought we'd meet in such a remote place. They say the wicked know the ways of their own kind." Fabio remarked, he and his team seemed to have reevaluated Hathaway's capabilities given Mafty's recent intensifying activities.

"So, what's up?"

"We've counted seven Base Jabbers, correct? General, we'd like to request a couple of them. With those at our disposal, seizing control of Darwin's airport would be a breeze."

"We don't have enough machines to spare. As you can see, we're even putting the Gundam to use."

Hathaway grinned, gesturing towards the Gundam's flight operations, which he had delegated to a young pilot.

"So, not Guangzhou, then?"

"No, reliable intel has confirmed it's Adelaide."

"Hmm. We had around a hundred allies concealed near Darwin, attempting to secure a vessel, but it looks like that was a waste of time," Fabio lamented with a groan.

"Did you figure out it was Adelaide based on the Circe Unit's movements?"

"This morning, it became clear that Guangzhou wasn't the right target."

Fabio and his companions exchanged a shrug, acknowledging Hathaway's prediction.

"I wonder, if you're open to collaboration, there's something we'd like your assistance with."

Hathaway introduced Fabio to Masam and Captain Wedge before broaching the topic.

"What's the request? If Guangzhou isn't the target, we're not planning to push ourselves to leave the continent."

"We'd like to request around thirty personnel to aid in an immediate strike on Darwin and a diversionary operation near Adelaide, assuming you're still game. With your help, our surprise attack will be flawless."

"An immediate attack on Darwin?"

Even the resolute Federico Martini was momentarily taken aback.

"Yes. Masam."

Hathaway gestured for Masam to outline the strategy they were considering.

"In essence, if you launch an assault on Darwin during daylight, we can create the impression that Mafty's Oenbelli forces are heading for Guangzhou, thereby misleading the enemy. This way, they'd never suspect we've resupplied here."

"I see. We'll need a little time to buy for our future plans," Fabio agreed, now convinced, and the conversation moved quickly.

"With the fifty or sixty people waiting in the harbor, we can initiate the attack on Darwin without delay," Chang Hei assured them.

"Supply us with ten portable missiles, and we'll guarantee success," Federico declared confidently.

"Alright then, Chang Hei. You come to pick me up with Galcezon. I'll go and select the thirty individuals to head for Adelaide."

"Sure. Which Garsezon will you lend us?"

"We'll utilize Riddick's unit."

"Gotcha."

Hathaway introduced Riddick and allowed Fabio and Chang to discuss the rendezvous point.

"But isn't this a bit rushed?"

"That is true, but the ministers are supposed to finalize their relocation today, with the Adelaide Conference set for the day after tomorrow."

"You certainly have an extensive intelligence network. I get where you're coming from, Mafty. But what about compensation afterward?"

Fabio asked Hathaway as they shook hands one last time.

"That's something we'll have to negotiate with Quack Salver for."

"Can you elaborate?"

"Captain, would you mind assisting him with his questions? The Valiant has to leave port soon, but what do you think?"

"Of course. Fabio, joining Mafty comes with certain limitations. Are you willing to abide by them?"

"I understand. Our forces are in dire need of financial support, so we can relate to your situation."

As their plans started taking shape, Hathaway took a moment to check on Julia Suga and her team's resupply and maintenance operations.

"Any issues?"

"Just one. We're waiting on a few more mobile suits to be delivered here."

As usual, Julia wore a t-shirt, and her nipples were pointedly erect.

"Perhaps we can address that need next year. And please, take care of Keria. We won't be able to see each other for a while."

"No worries, Keria and I get along well. But after the operation, try to be gentler with her. Your Mafty role can be tough on her, and you can be too demanding."

"I understand, but I'm relying on you," Hathaway stated earnestly, leaving Julia without any objections.

"Well, I suppose there's no choice..." Julia sighed, shrugged her shoulders, and quickly climbed the aluminum steps leading to the Valiant with a huff.

Hathaway felt as though he had been overly stern with her.

As the Valiant departed and Fabio and Federico's helicopter disappeared from view, Hathaway watched the Galcezon unit head inland.

"Chang, Riddick. I know it's nerve-wracking to be the last ones here, but I'm counting on you."

"Yes, sir."

They would join Fabio's staff and move to Adelaide.

Hathaway had Masam sit in the auxiliary seat of the Xi Gundam as they headed toward Darwin to make contact with the intel-gathering staff led by Keria, who had infiltrated the city.

Flying the Gundam low to the ground, they arrived at a hill on the opposite side of Darwin.

However, Keria was not there. Instead, three young men acting as her proxies approached them. Seeing their robust expressions, Hathaway felt somewhat reassured that he had successfully relayed a message to Keria through Julia.

Acting as Keria's liaisons, the young men provided information about the number of big carriers that had arrived at Darwin Airport up until noon that day.

"There were ground troops among them, and it seems that Man-Hunters were also on today's flight. You're familiar with the Manhunter incident in Davao, right?"

"We managed to catch the audio broadcast on TV."

Behind them, the verdant cityscape of Darwin stretched into the distance, offering a tranquil view that momentarily allowed them to forget their worries.

"They were accompanied by Hong Kong-based people. They requested heightened security measures be sent from Davao to Hong Kong and Guangzhou, but that turned out to be false."

"What worries us is that a significant amount of electronic equipment was transported on the flights up until yesterday."

Such was the information they shared.

"Could it be for reinforcing Adelaide's electrical infrastructure?"

Masam appeared doubtful.

"But Adelaide hasn't suffered from the colony drop or anything like that, so excessive reinforcement shouldn't be necessary."

Hathaway couldn't think of anything that would justify such extensive investment in electrical systems.

They were able to confirm the presence of high-output transformers, but apparently, the exact number remained unknown.

"We contacted Fabio and the others, thinking caution was warranted, but it seems that wasn't sufficient," Masam lamented anxiously.

"Well done. We have a better handle on the Federation government's security measures," Hathaway praised the young men's efforts before asking about Keria.

"Right. She's monitoring the situation from a hotel near the airport."

"Make sure she avoids police or military inspections and keep her at a safe distance from the airport. There's been a significant change in our operation. We've decided to work with the Owenbelli forces under Fabio Rivera."

"Oh, those guys?"

"Do you know them?"

"Well, they're friends, after all..."

The oldest of the young men said happily.

"If they prove effective, it'll work to our advantage. Monitor their activities and report to Quack Salver. Inform Keria to do the same."

"Will do. Good luck out there."

"Thank you."

As the three departed in their boat towards Darwin, Hathaway and Masam returned to the Gundam and left the area.

Shortly after, the Valiant was sunk by the Circe Unit's Penelope off the coast of Bynoe Harbour. However, flying low over the ground, Hathaway would not learn of this until he arrived at the relay point in Ayers Rock later that night.

If Hathaway and his team made a critical mistake, it was that they were too late in mobilizing Fabio and his forces.

Had Federico Martini and his unit attacked the airport when the big carrier carrying Kenneth and Gigi landed in Darwin, both Kenneth and Gigi might have met their end right then and there.

But Federico's attack came just after the carrier had taken on board a dozen or so high-ranking officials from the Federation government who had been waiting at the airport.

Gigi became involved once again.

"Captain... I have a bad feeling about this airport." Gigi remarked, prompting Kenneth to respond impulsively.

"We need to take off immediately!"

At Kenneth's command, officials at the airport scrambled onto the carrier, leaving their belongings behind.

"What's happening!? Captain?"

Many officials, like the one with the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, had traveled to Earth for leisure and were unaware of the urgent situation, like the Mafty incident. They all protested and perspired.

"Well, it's complicated. Please, if you would."

Kenneth had no intention of dealing with the bureaucrats, so he launched the carrier while glancing sideways at the accompanying aircraft, which was still loading passengers, fruits for the cabinet meeting attendees, and other items.

"Crossing the continent. We'll go ahead!"

Such a casual greeting was exchanged between carriers, and by the time the shadow of Kenneth's carrier disappeared from the Darwin horizon, mortar shells, and short-range missiles had been fired at the airport.

Two carriers trailing behind were set ablaze, and the Darwin airport building was half destroyed.

Shortly after the attack, Darwin's broadcast station reported the incident using the phrase "Mafty's Owenbelli Forces."

The Federico-led unit involved in the attack seized a civilian transport plane at the airport and escaped from Darwin mostly unscathed.

During the turmoil, Keria Dace fled north from a small airport originally intended for civilian use on the outskirts of Darwin rather than the airport.

"Unbelievable..."

Kenneth addressed the Federation officials seated in the cabin below.

"Mafty's forces heading to Guangzhou launched an attack on Darwin?"

The high-ranking bureaucrats listened to Kenneth's report, trying to ignore the discomfort of their sweat-soaked dress shirts.

"Yes, they have a Base Jabber for supporting their mobile suits, but they lack the transport capacity to carry ground troops. They must have wanted that."

"The Circe unit's operation was a success. Did you predict this?"

"Of course not. We don't have enough manpower for that. So, we're asking for an increase in budget," Kenneth said, sidestepping the question and bringing up the most pressing issue for his unit.

"It appears the Inner Space Minister is considering it. Reinforcement fleets are en route, and the budget itself may be increased."

"That would be appreciated."

"As members of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, I can't say we agree, but since you saved our lives, we'll support you."

"Thank you."

"How did you predict Mafty's attack?"

"Oh, just a hunch. No one would believe this kind of thing, so I didn't want to talk about it in detail," Kenneth replied.

Kenneth said this modestly and left the bureaucrats to go to the upper cabin.

There, Gigi had become something of a minor heroine.

Since Gigi's casual comments had proven accurate on multiple occasions, the officers began to view her as a savior.

"Why do you feel that way?"

Female officers surrounded Gigi and started a lighthearted conversation.

Kenneth was happy that Gigi was gaining recognition from the people around her, as this meant he wouldn't receive any backlash for bringing her along. So, he decided not to call out to her and returned to his seat in the cockpit.

"Captain, this kind of thing happens, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's about luck, isn't it? Some people bring that kind of thing with them."

"Are you talking about me?" Kenneth laughed, joining in with the captain.

"Yes, yes! You brought Gigi Andalusia here, Captain."

The co-pilot was also delighted.

"Didn't Kimberley have that sort of thing?"

Although Kenneth had vaguely expected it, he was convinced that Gigi would be a goddess for the Circe unit.

It was necessary to have this kind of belief in a place where life and death were so closely intertwined.

If the people around them have a belief that gives them confidence, good results can be achieved even without Gigi's power.

And if those good results were believed to be because of Gigi's presence, then she would become a goddess of good fortune.

However, for Kenneth personally, Gigi was no substitute for Mace.

When it came to a bed partner, he would prefer someone like Mace, an ordinary and unremarkable adult that Kenneth was familiar with, partly because he'd been married before.

With just one word, Gigi had dismissed her.

He didn't know how she did it, but her brilliant technique must have been far from reasonable.

Kenneth was worried about this, so he decided to keep Gigi by his side for the time being.

"Sorry for this, but..."

Hathaway aimed at the legs, focusing on the verniers of the Gustav Karls, and fired his beam rifle.

Chapter 13

Information

In the beginning, the vast expanse of the Australian continent resisted human settlement and development. Still, as pollution issues escalated towards the close of the last century, government policies were overruled, transforming some regions into refuse disposal sites.

The continent was, after all, part of the world's leading nations.

In the face of economic and population booms, even the youngest lands for humanity found themselves engulfed by the growth of the previous era.

The shift from the Christian era to the "Universal Century" did not herald a dazzling future as depicted in early sci-fi novels; instead, it adopted a somber resonance, acknowledging Earth's contamination for the sake of sustaining localized urban populations. To make amends for a compromised future, humanity turned to the construction of space colonies.

Hathaway and his team were particularly invested in the Earth Federation Government's Adelaide Conference, as the anticipated "Special Bill on a Return to Earth" was to be ratified at the Central Assembly.

Upon approval, Earth residency would be granted only to those recognized by the Earth Federation government.

Though this notion had remained an unspoken rule since the dawn of space colonies, it now facilitated the swifter expulsion of unauthorized Earth inhabitants compared to the temporary space migration laws of the forced space emigration period.

As the first century of the Universal Century drew to a close, Earth's population naturally swelled, yet the new regulations enabled the easy removal of these individuals.

Manhunting became legally sanctioned.

A further complication arose: those under direct Earth Federation government jurisdiction could live on Earth as they pleased, fostering an inclination towards bureaucratic dictatorship.

Since the Earth Federation government's present-day society is marked by hereditary systems among bureaucrats and assembly members, it can be inferred that the unfolding reality under such policies is inherently discriminatory.

The government cunningly crafted the legislation in such a manner that none of these issues could be predicted from the legal text alone.

This is why Hathaway and his colleagues carried out purges of cabinet members, striving to dismantle the hereditary system and blood ties that permeated the central bureaucracy.

Ideally, public opinion should overturn such matters, but history refuses to simply repeat itself.

If humanity's living space was confined to Earth, public opinion could potentially influence the central government through shifting geopolitical landscapes.

However, during the space colony era, the intentions and desires of those living in isolated, enclosed spaces did not reach the Earth Federation government.

Even though cosmic laws might emerge to supplant geopolitics, they had not yet become deeply rooted in the collective subconscious. The integration of the space colony era into human history remained in its early stages.

The inconclusive, small-scale outcome of Char's Rebellion appears to symbolize this.

For individuals like Gigi Andalusia, the options were limited: either join the ranks of bureaucrats or civil servants or become a relative – both seemingly unattainable.

Yet, it is inherent in human nature to occasionally go against the flow...

As evening fell on the day Hathaway and his colleagues initiated their move to the next relay point, cabinet ministers and high-ranking bureaucrats began to arrive in Adelaide, accompanied by their escorts. They settled into heavily guarded hotels.

In essence, the city transformed into the Central Assembly of the Federation government, with ordinary people being excluded.

However, Adelaide, which had no more than ten thousand residents, effectively became the Earth Federation government itself.

Defense preparations had been underway since the Kimberley Hayman era. Once the facility construction commenced under Kenneth Slegg's direction, relocating the cabinet meeting would have proven difficult.

"Chief, have you seen it?"

As soon as Hundley Yeoksan picked up the receiver, he heard the voice.

"Of course."

Gazing at the square, white Festival Center building from his hotel window – the central structure that required protection – Yeoksan understood Minister of Culture, Education, and Promotion of McGovern's distress.

"It could damage the reputation of the Federation government."

"Well, that's one way to look at it, but don't worry. I'm discussing the matter with the information and communications staff."

"Regardless, Kimberley unit's mobile suits are crushing people by grabbing and stepping on them. No matter the justification, this shouldn't be shown to the general public. This isn't some TV drama. The cameras even captured the squad's emblem on the mobile suit's body. How can we explain this?"

While listening to the lengthy explanation with a sense of boredom, Chief Yeoksan scrutinized the activity of cars around the Festival Center.

This private room was unknown even to his direct subordinates. Only his secretary was aware, and they had them wait in the official room and transfer calls.

That was how he conducted business.

"I understand your concerns, Minister. I've already been discussing the matter with the Chief Secretary and three other individuals, and we'll take action against the station that broadcast the footage."

The explanation remained the same.

"We mustn't resort to violence. No violence--"

"Yes, but we have no choice but to label it as fake news."

"That would mean repercussions for the press. SPTV is a tough network to handle. It's not something we can easily do."

"You think so? How about removing that chairman on separate charges..."

As the minister continued to speak, Yeoksan couldn't help but think that this particular minister was a complete idiot.

"Is this also a leakable issue?" he asked.

"Yes, it is. Particularly regarding antitrust laws."

"I see... if that's the case, then anyone could be suspended, but isn't that a bit underhanded?"

"But the problem is about the reputation of the Federation, as you said so, Minister, did you not?"

"Yes, but we can still treat it as an exception."

"Well..."

"Alright, then please suppress the news as soon as possible... Ah, and I don't want to be involved in this any further, understand?"

"Of course, I will handle it under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Finance, so I will also forget about it."

"That's good."

When Yeoksan hung up the phone, the next call was already coming in.

"What is it?"

"Sir, the Ministry of Information and Communications will act on the issue of the Oenbelli massacre news, but since their up against SPTV from Londonion, it will take some time..."

"Who is it from?"

"It's from the secretary of Minister Papierrot Halmatch..."

"Ugh... please continue negotiations with the Ministry of Information, and also contact the Ministry of Finance."

"That's gonna take a few more hours until the Vice Minister arrives."

"Hmm... How long can we keep the direct line to Londonion?"

"Only 20 more minutes. The connection through the North American continent is via an undersea cable, so we're still applying for it."

"It's inconvenient. Have we made arrangements with the Vice Minister of the General Staff?"

"One moment, please. It seems a message has come in."

"Hmm..."

Roughly an hour earlier that evening, a TV station based in the Side 1 space colony of Londenion aired a news report about the Oenbelli massacre. The video showcased Kimberley's forces quelling the private soldiers under Fabio Rivera's command, who had assembled in Oenbelli. One of Fabio's subordinates had managed to travel to Side 1 and provided the station with the footage. The program also featured an interview with this individual.

Of course, the news didn't remain confined to just one space colony; it rapidly disseminated throughout hundreds of space colonies and even reached Earth, particularly in areas with a direct line to Londenion. In Adelaide, where government officials convened, it was simple to access the news, thanks to signals received from antennas situated across Earth and each Side.

In spite of the ongoing crisis where artificial satellites barely functioned due to the anti-federation government movement, the Federation government's power enabled them to sustain a minimum level of facility operations.

"The deputy chief of staff is available now, correct?"

"The Plaza Hotel, right? Inform them we're en route."

"Yes, sir."

After issuing these instructions to his secretary, Hundley Yeoksan, accompanied by Gass H. Huguest, made their way to the Plaza Hotel, which was just a five-minute drive away.

The hotel was reserved entirely for the staff of the General Staff Headquarters, and Chief Yeoksan went up to the top floor where the Space Force officers were staying.

"I've only just arrived and haven't even showered yet, and now this," grumbled Captain Brad Loewe, the Vice-Minister, upon opening his mouth.

"Will the ministers arrive tonight?"

"Yes, barring any unforeseen circumstances."

Feeling annoyed by the nonchalant attitude of the tourist-like Captain, Yeoksan spoke with a stern tone, causing Loewe to adjust his tie.

"You're familiar with Kenneth's Circe unit, right?"

"Yes, I heard they're arriving here tomorrow morning. The barrier construction has been full steam for three days; it's quite a daunting task..."

Chief Yeoksan exchanged glances with Gass, both of them incredulous at the laid-back attitude of the personnel who had come down from space.

In that regard, Gass, who felt self-conscious about being assigned to a remote area, had been putting in far more effort. Yeoksan had decided to bring Gass along, leaving the interrogation of the hijackers from Haunzen, because the central staffers were proving ineffective. In that sense, Gass had also played the role of liaison between the Circe unit and the Manhunter unit in Davao.

"Captain Sleg is also struggling. The ministers keep making ill-advised remarks, you know?"

"It seems so..."

"What are your thoughts?"

"Regarding what?"

The Captain in front of Chief Yeoksan seemed like a man who knew nothing.

"I'm talking about support from the Circe unit."

"We've been discussing that as a matter for the General Staff since we arrived in Hong Kong."

"I know it's not my place to say anything, but the poor performance in Oenbelli wasn't solely due to the commander's shortcomings but also organizational issues. Do you see where I'm coming from? We need experienced combatants immediately. I want you to remind the minister about the existence of the 13th Autonomous Unit at Londenion."

"Is it really necessary to do that?"

"Yes..."

"We aren't an Earth-centric military."

"But you're part of the General Staff, aren't you?"

"That's why we're addressing it in a general meeting..."

Recognizing that this Captain was a poor bureaucrat, the chief patiently elaborated.

"May I? It's disconcerting that my own officers have been placed under the command of the Circe unit, but Captain Sleg is also in a difficult situation. And all this occurred because the cabinet ministers prioritized their own safety and imposed their authority. Therefore, I want you to understand that what you just said contradicts the cabinet meeting's intentions and is a statement that disregards them, Captain."

"Are you trying to intimidate me?"

"The Cabinet meeting won't start until the day after tomorrow, and there are many things that need to be done before that," the chief replied, avoiding the question.

"..."

Finally, the Captain seemed to realize that his own neck was on the line. He rubbed his neck and stared at the ceiling.

"Bright Noa from the 13th Autonomous Unit. A young and battle-hardened Newtype. Do I have that right?"

Hundley Yeoksan had forgotten all about that name since he last heard it from Hathaway at the Davao airport. So he asked the Captain to check.

"I-I'll look into it."

Captain Brad Loewe vaguely responded but made sure to jot down the name.

Chapter 14

Damage in Dark Bottom

Though the pollution in the atmosphere had not yet entirely cleared, the constellation centered around the Southern Cross etched out each brilliant point of light with precision.

The earth, so profoundly and lustrously black, seemed as if it might reflect the very stars above.

Yet, silence was absent.

From right to left, left to right.

At times, streaks of light that marred the constellations' glow would stretch out, reminiscent of a ferocious beast.

Whether it be material or otherwise, those displaying fierce intent in a localized area could only be perceived as radiating madness toward nature itself.

WHOOOM!

The streaks of light transformed into fireballs, the ensuing acoustics sliding across the pitch-black earth and diffusing in all directions. It was as if the phenomenon revealed the transparency of sound.

"We did it!"

"Confirmed! Maneuvering!"

"Below! I see the tail nozzle's light!"

"Just intimidate, don't pursue!"

Such communications crisscrossed amidst the interference of Minovsky particles because they, the mobile suits, were in close proximity.

"We must disengage..."

Upon the earth, flashes sparkled like earthbound stars, while from slightly above, a rain of light showered down.

However, amidst the vastness of the earth and stars, these running lights appeared as mere pointillist details, added as if to provide a subtle shift in the landscape.

And to further embellish this transformation, a red glow spread out, leaping onto the earth in elongated streaks.

This light brought the surrounding rubble and mountains of debris into sharp relief, yet the glow of the downed mobile suit seemed to vanish with alarming haste.

In due course, a wildfire sparked as if from a forgotten memory, gradually infiltrating the darkness on all sides with tendrils of flame.

By that time, the roar of the mobile suits had faded into the darkness, leaving the stars to merely bear witness to the expanding feast of fire as it began to lap at the mountains of waste.

Hathaway Noa and Iram Masam, who had visually spotted the tendrils of flame on the left horizon, exchanged uneasy glances in the cockpit of the Xi Gundam.

The images magnified by the camera at maximum zoom showed the wildfire had spread over a considerable area.

"Could it be a controlled burn or a mountain fire these days?"

Masam, seated in an improvised seat next to the regular one, muttered quietly.

Since they had left Darwin's territory, they had confirmed that the Galcezon, carrying Chang Hei and about thirty soldiers under Fabio Rivera, was headed towards Ayers Rock. So there had been no cause for concern.

Yet now, just a breath away from Ayers Rock, they were faced with an unexplained wildfire.

"Yes, it's a wasteland around here..."

The two consciously discussed other matters. Hathaway checked the 360-degree view on the multi-screen, and the direction calculated by celestial navigation seemed safe for the moment.

"We've long passed Mount Zeil..."

Hathaway uttered the obvious, trying to shake off the ominous feeling.

"Shall we go check it out?"

Masam's hand patted Hathaway's, even through the pilot suit.

"We have no choice but to investigate what's bothering us."

As Hathaway directed the mobile suit toward the direction of the wildfire, they quickly closed the distance.

The small mountains they saw were piles of garbage, their flickering lights revealing various colors of flame and smoke.

The fire had spread widely, creating a scene reminiscent of magma pushing up to the surface.

"How did the fire start?"

"It must be spontaneous combustion."

Even as he spoke, Hathaway knew it wasn't true. His ominous feeling only intensified.

"The windward side is this way."

Hathaway directed the mobile suit into the wind. The air pressure created by the Gundam stirred the flames below, causing them to spew embers wildly.

"...!!!"

Both Masam and Hathaway exhaled breaths that could not form words.

Their premonition had come true.

Amid the distant glow of the flames, a single leg of a Messer pointed towards the sky. It must have been blown off by the explosion of the main body.

No other fragments of the mobile suit could be seen.

Hathaway lowered the cockpit to the main body's chest level and, with a manipulator, grasped the standing Messer leg amidst the burnt wreckage.

"It's Morley's suit..."

Reading the manufacturing number on the heel, Hathaway groaned.

The thought of her body having that curled-up feeling, consumed by fire brought a sharp pain to his chest.

"What about the others...?"

The two, not forgetting to keep watch on their surroundings, searched for the remains of mobile suits around the area where a massive explosion seemed to have occurred. But amid the flames and the heaps of debris, they could not find any.

Their wingmen were Rod Hein's Messer and Hendrix Hiyo's 3 Galcezon.

"..."

"This crater must have been caused by the main engine's explosion..."

"Or maybe it's just the way the debris is piled up."

No matter how one looked at it, Hathaway's observation was far from optimistic.

"We should consider it as the enemy's mobile suit movement route. Let's go."

Masam urged Hathaway forward.

Raising the cockpit again, the Gundam headed towards the rendezvous point at Ayers Rock.

Neither of them knew yet that the Valiant had been sunk.

Once again, they flew through the darkness, relying solely on celestial navigation, soaring between the stars and the pitch-black earth.

"This should be the area..."

The area the Gundam approached was once the most famous tourist spot on the continent. However, now it was impossible to discern its distinctive rocky outcrops in the darkness.

After activating the camera, the Gundam flashed its signal lights a few times. The two of them scanned their surroundings in turns.

"Found it!"

Masam spotted two lights that were briefly illuminated on the ground.

"It's still quite a distance away. About 24 kilometers."

Hathaway measured the distance of the two lights with the camera and began to descend the machine.

As they reached an altitude of 15 meters and 100 meters from the rendezvous point, a line of headlights appeared on the ground.

The reddish earth seemed to float up, and more than anything, a wall of rock loomed before them.

"Damn it! Are we really this close to Ayers Rock?!"

As Masam cursed, Hathaway continued to lower the Gundam between the beams of the headlights. The lights of the dozen or so trailers disappeared just as the Gundam's landing gear was about to touch down.

In their place, a few small flashlight beams approached the Gundam.

What awaited them there was a tragic report, but the 3 Galsezon was still safe.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't save the two of them..."

Hendrix Hiyo, Captain of the Galsezon, wiped his tears as he reported to Hathaway.

"You did well just to shake off the enemy and make it this far."

Suppressing his regret, Hathaway comforted Hendrix as he headed towards the trailer cabin. There, he learned of the Valiant's sinking.

"Wedge, Morley, Rod... Why do the good guys always die first..."

If one survives, another perishes... Hathaway knew this, but he couldn't help but pause.

"Still, Rick managed to make a bold move just to blind the enemy, and he's only just arrived. He was cool-headed. If it were me, I might've brought the enemy with me."

Raymond Cain praised his colleague's achievements while trying to pump Hathaway up.

"That's true. He's something else."

Hathaway reminded himself not to show despair in front of others, and with a smile, he turned his feet toward the trailer.

"Mafty."

Chang Hei's voice came from the shadows.

"Ah! Great work."

As Hathaway shook hands with Chang and learned that Fabio and the others were already resting, he said, "Discuss the strategy tomorrow. Leave everything here to Roewest and his team, and rest well tonight."

"Yes, that's the plan. Take care."

As Chang disappeared into the darkness near the trailers, Hathaway sensed the fragility of his position, gaining new allies at the cost of losing old ones, and felt the danger looming over Mafty's organization.

This was no ordinary war. It was a terribly unbalanced battle.

"Roewest! Regarding the Valiant, I heard you intercepted enemy communications, but have you confirmed this from Darwin or any other means?"

"Yes, we're working on it."

Roewest Heinrich, in charge of this point, confidently shook hands with Hathaway.

"Sounds like two carriers were destroyed at the Darwin Airport, right?"

"We let Oenbelli's forces handle that. You know Fabio Rivera, right?"

"I don't know him, but if that's how it went, it makes sense. I was worried that we had lost another mobile suit. Bad things tend to happen all at once."

"How are Gawman and the others doing?"

"I haven't heard any strange radio signals, so they should be fine..."

As Hathaway caught his breath and finally reached for his coffee, he glanced over the continental map spread out on the table and at Roewest's words.

"What happened?"

Hathaway looked at the captains of the Galcezon when Hathaway saw Masam aligning his shoulders with Roewest.

"Thanks."

With both hands wrapped around his coffee cup, Hendrix explained the situation. The story was simple.

Rick's team was caught by a Circe unit squad, and it was too late to intercept them. If there was any disadvantage for Rick's team, it was that Rod and Morley had to be dispersed to avoid detection of the rendezvous point, which led to them being defeated individually.

"Why weren't the Galcezon pursued?"

"The enemy and us, we were the same battle unit. After witnessing the two mobile suits being shot down, they seemed satisfied..."

"Couldn't you inflict any damage on the enemy?"

"Morley's suit should have taken down a Gustav Karl, and Rod and I should have downed a Kessaria."

"What! Did you shoot them down!?"

The captains of Galcezon, including Civet and Raymond, were astonished. Apparently, that report hadn't been made.

"Unbelievable... While we're desperately monitoring the enemy... Even if there's only one enemy mobile suit left, they won't pursue."

Roewest, too, couldn't help but smile wryly.

"Is that so..."

As Hathaway patted the shoulders of the shrunken Hendrix nestled between Civet and Raymond, he said,

"That's how it is on the battlefield. If you keep brooding, you'll be done for. Morley and Rod would laugh at you. Get some sleep. Give him some meds, would you?"

Hathaway motioned to the two men on either side of him to take care of him and ushered them out of the cabin.

"..."

With the blackout curtain in front of the cabin door behind him, Hathaway watched the three depart and remembered the pain of the battlefield when he learned of Quess Paraya's death.

"It was just awful..."

It should have been on an asteroid approaching Earth, but he couldn't recall anything of the sort. Instead, a leaden weight churned inside his belly, a constant ache that refused to dissolve - the only memory left behind.

That was when he started to truly understand the weight of sorrow.

With that in mind, what had happened with Keria was nothing more than a trivial consequence of worldly acts.

And as for Gigi, it was nothing more than the tentacles of lurking lust craving for desire.

"What a shame..."

Hathaway murmured while tracing the line where the darkness of Ayers Rock hid the stars with his eyes.

But upon uttering those words, he felt an unexpected surge of lust and was startled by the depth of his own desires.

Chapter 15

Gigi's Spring

Alice Springs.

Situated 350 kilometers northeast of Ayers Rock, this once-thriving tourist hub for the renowned natural wonder had since transformed.

Following the rise of unrest on the continent, Alice Springs became the headquarters for a branch of the Criminal Police Organization and a base for Manhunters.

The nighttime scenery in the suburbs presented a striking contrast to Hathaway's meeting point. Brilliant guiding lights cast aside the heavy, looming darkness, forming two parallel lines on the ground, proudly showcasing their artificial brilliance.

Even with the interference of Minovsky particles in the atmosphere, potent laser beacons functioned as navigational aids. Utilizing celestial navigation, the carrier transporting Kenneth Sleg and Gigi executed a flawless landing on the well-maintained runway.

Kenneth would have preferred to head directly to Adelaide, but due to the lack of available carriers, they had no choice but to accommodate the Manhunters stationed in Alice Springs, even if it meant pushing themselves. They also had to coordinate the subsequent flight.

Upon receiving news of the chaos in Darwin via radio, Kenneth had grumbled when he acknowledged their inevitable stop at Alice Springs. Gigi, however, reassured him.

"It's worth the detour. Imagine if our mobile suit squad arrives first and takes out Mafty's mobile suit."

Gigi's words were met with dubious gazes from nearby officers.

"We'll give you credit for the prediction in Darwin, but if this one does as well, it'll be borderline comical. There's that saying, 'If it happens twice, it'll happen thrice,' right?"

"If that turns out to be true, we'll trust in Gigi's prophetic abilities."

The officers were quite supportive but still half-joking.

Nonetheless, upon arriving in Alice Springs, they discovered Gigi's prediction, made an hour earlier, had come to fruition.

The unit that engaged what was believed to be Mafty's mobile suit squad had departed from Davao, taking the most westerly course toward Adelaide.

Despite having a Gustav Karl and a Kessaria heavily damaged, the squadron managed to have one remaining Gustav Karl travel part of the way

with the Kessaria. When the Kessaria could no longer fly, the Gustav Karl carried the four crew members to Alice Springs.

Despite losing allied units, the fact that two of Mafty's mobile suits were confirmed shot down caused a stir in Alice Springs.

Gigi's prediction might not have accounted for their side's losses, but the officers and officials accompanying her no longer questioned her capabilities.

"It's more than just exceptional intuition; it's uncanny. There are plenty of self-proclaimed seers, but none can achieve this."

Kenneth's mood had significantly improved.

With Gigi's credibility now firmly established among the officers, Kenneth could trust that she would be well cared for, allowing him to concentrate more on his command.

Lieutenant Minecche Kestalgino, Kenneth's aide, courteously escorted Gigi to a suite in a hotel with a view of a synthetic pond.

"Thank you. Where will the Captain be staying?"

"He has work to do late into the night, so he'll be in the illuminated section over there."

The lieutenant drew back the window curtains and gestured toward the hotel windows on the pond's opposite side.

"So, he's aware of my whereabouts?"

"Yes, I'll inform him right away."

The lieutenant stepped onto the balcony, surveyed the scenery on both sides, and remarked, "If you require anything, just notify the hotel staff. The military procures everything in this area, so barring personal preferences, there should be no complaints."

He chuckled at his own joke, visibly amused.

"Thank you very much."

"No, I feel that someone like you is akin to a lucky charm, regardless of what others may say."

The lieutenant also appeared to be in high spirits.

"A lucky charm?"

"Yes... Perhaps becoming a husband and father makes one more superstitious. I rely on you. So, what about the future? Do you sense anything?"

The middle-aged man eagerly awaited Gigi's response, lingering around her unnecessarily.

"Well... Let's see. Perhaps things will proceed smoothly... But remember, I'm not a prophet."

"I understand. Thank you. Please get some rest tonight and show us your renewed strength tomorrow."

"Thank you for your consideration."

Gigi had no interest in prolonging their exchange of pleasantries, so she sidestepped him and made her way to the room's door.

"Undoubtedly, you will be our guardian angel."

"I'll do my best. Good night."

At last, with those words, the lieutenant took his leave.

He hadn't been flirting with Gigi but genuinely admiring her. His overtures, however, were inelegant.

Gigi couldn't help but smirk at the middle-aged man's awkwardness. As the amusement from that interaction faded, Gigi began to question whether her actions had indeed been the right ones.

Yesterday, Gigi had contacted Professor Amada Mansan, the guarantor for Hathaway's residence, and today she found herself siding with Kenneth, contemplating her own fortune in his situation.

It wasn't a simple desire to witness the conflict between the two men, Hathaway and Kenneth, from a neutral standpoint.

"..."

Immersed in a bathtub brimming with warm water, Gigi sensed that various aspects were slightly amiss.

"I think today's events are the result of the Captain's luck. He's quite capable as a commander. He makes sure to prepare things behind the scenes."

Gigi, observing Kenneth Sleg's demeanor when in her presence - gentle as a lamb - felt confident that her assessment was correct.

"Maybe Hathaway and his group are somewhat like drifters. He seems to be struggling to maintain his footing..."

The thought evoked a profound sadness when contrasted with Kenneth's situation.

Indeed, Gigi believed that Hathaway was operating closely as a member of Mafty.

As she relaxed her entire body, her lower half floated in the warm water.

In this buoyant state, Gigi tried to clear her thoughts as if predicting her own fortune.

Her toes broke the water's surface, her kneecaps parting and sinking back into the water, only to reveal her flat abdomen, floating and spanning a broad surface area.

"..."

A wave of sadness washed over her as she recalled the countenance of Cardias Boundenwooden, the count who had loved to rest his head against her belly.

Though they had been intimate only once or twice, there were no unpleasant memories.

The count likely considered it a playful gesture when he used Gigi's abdomen as a pillow, even though their relationship didn't involve anything more than spending the night together.



Despite the superficial nature of their connection, he had enjoyed the simple meals they shared, calling those moments a source of solace.

"Poor man... Plagued by his business and inheritance troubles until his death, everyone around him just wanted him to pass away quickly..."

Of course, the elderly founder of a world-renowned insurance company never divulged his personal matters to Gigi in detail. But, after spending more than a year together, she could intuit various things.

As her lower half floated for the second time, her toes emerged from the water, this time angling to the left.

Gigi was certain she hadn't consciously chosen this direction.

"It's decided..."

In this manner, Gigi decided her future course based on whether her toes were pointed to the right or left.

When it came down to choosing between Hathaway and Kenneth, her choice was evident.

Nonetheless, Gigi sided with Kenneth, likely driven by an underlying urge to rely on an older figure.

"Must be a father complex..."

As Gigi began to feel at ease, the chime beside the bathtub rang.

"Yes...?"

"It's Kenneth. I'll stop by in a bit. Is that alright?"

"Of course?"

Gigi hung up the phone and quickly cooled her overheated body with a slightly cold shower before preparing herself for Kenneth's arrival.

Kenneth knocked on the door just after Gigi had ordered room service for drinks.

"Nice room, isn't it? Lucky to find such a hotel in a place like this."

"Yes... a wonder of the century."

"Apparently, some folks at the top of the Federation government have tens of thousands of acres of land around here registered under their own names."

"What's that all about?"

"Well... status. It's what people ultimately desire. To get it, some within the government use the government itself."

"Ugh, I hate that. Why do adults have to be like that?"

"Lack of imagination, I suppose."

Kenneth's answer was simple, but it gave Gigi a clear answer. People desire material possessions to display their status when they have nothing to show for it themselves.

Ambitious people invest with an eye towards preserving their position and wealth a hundred years later, as they are social animals. Gigi understood this easily enough.

That was the influence of the count's teachings.

But there's no guarantee that this is eternal in reality.

What can people take with them when they die?

Isn't it better to have a mindset of being able to die without fear? The desire to live longer is human nature. That desire comes from wanting to do what you've left undone, what you must do.

There's no one person who should be kept alive for the sake of humanity and the world.

Gigi had learned from the count that the human heart's desire to be beyond the cycles of life and death while being an animal made people forget this.

She felt that she had also been shown human cruelty by the old man.

So even now, watching Kenneth approaching middle age, she didn't think she had made a mistake in what she had decided in the bathtub earlier.

"When you're young, do what you can only do when you're young."

Otherwise, you'll regret it.

And then you can't die well. That's the way of those who age. So Gigi was going to Hathaway.

"Do you know anything about Captain Heyman?"

"What's this all of a sudden?"

"I just thought it'd be nice if the last unresolved issue of the Circe unit could be resolved while we're at it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

With a bitter smile, Kenneth showed his indulgence towards Gigi, like a father to his daughter. He had forgotten the disgust he felt towards the girl who had pushed Mace away.

"There's a place called Ayers Rock nearby, isn't there? Can we see it before we leave tomorrow morning? I want to do some sightseeing."

"What? That would be quite a detour... Are you sure it has anything to do with Kimberley?"

"I don't know. I just thought of it."

"Really?"

Kenneth looked down at Gigi,

"We did shoot down Mafty's mobile suits tonight. It's in the south from here."

Kenneth was trying to see through Gigi's thoughts,

"Shall we go? You think Kimberley's there?"

"I haven't connected the dots like that, but..."

Gigi smiled wryly, but she was inwardly worried if Hathaway had come up with a countermeasure to match Kenneth's tactics...

"Let's send out the mobile suit team. We'll send Lane's unit ahead to Adelaide."

"But weren't we here to recover the Manhunter? Captain, shouldn't we head straight to Adelaide?"

"Yeah. I'll head there directly on the carrier, but Gigi, you can go sightseeing at Ayers Rock with a Kessaria."

"What if it's a waste?"

"It'll be fine. The folks going with you will be happy, won't they?"

"Really?"

"Absolutely. Everyone knows the rumors about you by now, so there won't be any complaints."

Kenneth kissed Gigi on the forehead and ordered her to sleep early in a commanding tone, then quickly left her room.

Chapter 16

Beauce Londenion

"To Earth? When?"

"Early morning, the day after tomorrow."

Mirai Yashima was taken aback by her husband Bright Noa's words.

"But we were planning to look at a shop in New Hampshire that day, weren't we?"

"True, but... can't we go tomorrow instead?"

"Did you *really* submit your resignation to the military?"

"They seemed to accept it, considering my extensive combat experience as a captain. After all, there aren't many captains in Londenion who have actually fought on Earth... But they promised me that I could retire after this operation is completed."

"You must be joking..."

Mirai held her tongue and took Bright's hand instead.

"Can you try asking the real estate agent if they can show us the shop tomorrow?"

"But we agreed on the day after tomorrow for their sake."

As she said this, Mirai began pressing the phone's buttons. Her quick reflexes in situations like this harkened back to her days as the helmsman of the White Base.

She and Bright were married because of their bond as comrades in arms.

Although neither had yet entered middle age, their early military careers had given Bright more than enough combat experience.

That's why, in the aftermath of Char's Rebellion, he contemplated retirement and submitted his request about six months ago.

Some veterans ventured into politics, but for those like Bright, who had endured actual combat since their reserve days, many opted for retirement if they could survive the minimum period required for their pension.

The mental exhaustion was relentless.

One might say they aged prematurely.

In Bright's case, witnessing the deaths of his men weighed heavily on him.

He did consider that the duty of experienced people was to change society itself to prevent situations like war from happening again.

However, Bright felt drained of the energy required to become a politician.

When on the front line, be it in the military or as a bureaucrat, one encounters the inherent issues within organizations.

With humanity's current capabilities, reforming the detrimental habits birthed by organizations appeared insurmountable.

Even a saint would find it difficult to change the individual discrepancies that naturally arose within an organization created by ordinary people.

Bright concluded that the only solution to the bad habits of organizations was for everyone to become pure and incorruptible.

This was also the foundation that gave rise to the Newtype ideology.

Bright was a man who had come to this realization amidst circumstances directly linked to the deaths of his men.

With no alternatives, Bright resolved to attempt something new.

For a while, they would manage a quaint restaurant and, as ordinary people, contemplate their future within the humdrum world.

"..."

Bright sank into the sofa, smirking at the sight of Mirai with the telephone receiver, bowing her head. He couldn't help but think her Japanese heritage contributed to such unnecessary gestures.

During his time managing their restaurant, his outlook might shift, and he might even dabble in politics. If that time came, he would likely espouse the lofty ideal that humanity must evolve into Newtypes, like a second coming of Zeon Deikun.

It would be regarded as idealistic foolishness, and it might not garner votes in an election.

However, in Bright's case, if he didn't do something like that, he feared that everything he had learned in the wars in space would go to waste.

He resolved to begin with civilian life to acquire the necessary methods and capabilities.

As for his chosen profession, he sought a building for his restaurant, a venture that addressed the basic human needs of food, clothing, and shelter.

He hadn't anticipated Hathaway's sister, Cheimin, lending a hand, but the prospect of working in the kitchen of a lakeside home-turned-restaurant with Mirai seemed appealing.

With this in mind, Bright had even enrolled in a cooking school to obtain the necessary certification.

It was at that moment the order to head planetside came down.

"How about tomorrow afternoon? Can you make time?"

"I can. I'll convince the higher-ups."

Bright rose from the sofa, took the receiver from Mirai, and contacted the ship.

Even if they were to sortie the day after tomorrow, there was no need to worry, as the staff of the Ra Cailum, which Bright currently commanded, were more than capable of handling the preparations.

Bright had no intention of adhering to a rigid, bureaucratic, and formulaic approach to military matters. After briefly confirming with his second-in-command, Raegen Hamsett, he hung up the phone.

"In return, we'll head straight to the ship afterward and sortie immediately."

"Well, there's no helping it."

Mirai shrugged slightly.

"But this mission should be straightforward... At least that's the impression I get."

"Yeah. Though it's a hassle to descend to Earth, we're only providing support for the Circe Unit in the Pacific District. It's nothing serious."

Bright went upstairs to change his shirt and returned.

"Do you think the Oenbelli Massacre was the direct cause?"

"Maybe... I delved into Kimberly Heyman's background, but it seems fairly typical for a civilian-turned-officer. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"But to have a mobile suit crush people... That's rather extreme, isn't it?"

Mirai plucked lint from the shoulder of Bright's uniform while sitting in a chair by the entrance.

"A man lacking combat experience might react that way when confronted with an enemy akin to ground forces."

"Ground forces... They don't exist in space colonies, do they?"

Mirai stood while brushing off Bright's jacket.

"I can't quite imagine guerilla warfare against mobile suits."

Bright donned his jacket and mused, "It's a challenging issue, controlling one's power when armed like an elephant but beset by ants."

"Yeah, I suppose so..."

Bright accepted the military cap Mirai offered and gently kissed her cheek.

"You might get to see Hathaway, you know."

"Yeah... after the operation, we'll try to visit the island where he's completing his botanical internship."

With that, Bright bade Mirai farewell and headed towards the elec-car parked in the front yard.

"What about dinner tonight?"

"I won't make it, but I'll definitely return."

"Alright. Take care, dear."

As Mirai closed the elec-car door, she chased away the sudden sense of unease with a warm smile, sending Bright on his way.



This Side 1 space colony, Londenion, was named as such because it was an early colony of the space colony era. The name comes from the ancient Roman word for "barren land," which is the etymology of London, the capital of England.

Nearly a century later, Londenion had evolved into a colony with a settled, historical ambiance, yet the people's mindset, as evidenced by Bright and his wife, remained deeply rooted in the past century.

Similarly, the heart of the Australian continent persisted unconquered by humanity, much like Londenion, awaiting the break of dawn.

"Is this really the time for jokes?"

Under the sharp silhouette of the Penelope, illuminated by the emerging daylight, Lieutenant Lane Aim gazed down one side of the runway.

Led by Kenneth, a squad appeared to be heading towards a lone Kessaria as though embarking on a leisurely outing.

The scene was reminiscent of the one in Davao, with a squad launching for the purpose of sightseeing at Ayers Rock.

With Gigi Andalusia before them, the pilots of the Kessaria and the two Gustav Karls were delighted that this auspicious young girl would be joining their squad.

"Understand? The Kessaria with Gigi on board will stay in the rear. Don't even think about entering the combat zone."

"Hehehehe!"

At Kenneth's explicit command, the pilots chuckled.

"Be prepared for the possibility of encountering Mafty's mobile suit forces. We hadn't anticipated Mafty would hide in such an obvious location as Ayers Rock, but our mission is reconnaissance. Remain vigilant!"

"Yes, sir!"

The men before Kenneth and Gigi rendered a disciplined salute, if only for a fleeting moment, before promptly ascending the ladder to the Kessaria's bridge.

"Ms. Gigi! Please, come aboard!"

The co-pilot, having gone ahead, beckoned Gigi from the lower hatch.

"Yes, thank you."

As Kenneth observed Gigi's petite yet curvaceous figure climb the ladder to the bridge, he felt reassured that dispatching a squad to Ayers Rock was a sound strategic decision.

If it weren't for Gigi's suggestion, he wouldn't have carried it out.

"I'll arrange for your lunch, okay?"

"Much appreciated, Captain."

With that, Gigi vanished onto the bridge.

Lane Aim couldn't discern the specifics from his vantage point, but he too had learned from his fellow pilots that morning why the Kessaria, carrying Gigi, and two Gustav Karls, were bound for Ayers Rock.

Lane Aim understood that it was a simple good luck charm operation. However.

"Still, involving an amateur girl in the actual operations of a combat unit is the epitome of idiocy. That's the way of a Captain who's gone senile after spending too much time in the technical field."

Lane thought as much and found it strange that the pilots would accept such a situation.

Could it be that the mere existence of this unit and the twisted world of the adults pulling the strings was evidence of something fundamentally wrong?

Since the invasion of the continent, the performance of Penelope had steadily improved, and Lane had become more accustomed to it. The mechanics had become familiar with the machine, too, and it was gradually becoming a true combat unit.

But Lane could not forget the humiliation of being shot down by that Gundam wannabe. He believed that he had lost because of the guilt he felt over taking a hostage in a mobile suit battle, all under Kenneth's orders.

He couldn't help but think that as long as they relied on the likes of Gigi, a girl connected to Kenneth, they would never be able to defeat the new mobile suit used by Mafty.

"Only real strength matters. Luck, predictions... none of that will decide the outcome of a mobile suit battle."

As far as military matters were concerned, Kenneth was indeed formidable. But by turning Gigi into a mascot, Lane concluded that there was something unbalanced about Kenneth's character.

It's a conclusion similar to the hostage situation with Gawman.

"I won't be defeated by that Gundam wannabe again..."

However, what Lane failed to recognize was that he had only managed to escape from the Gundam without sustaining fatal injuries because of the support from the hostage Gawman.

His linear way of thinking was a product of his youth.

VRRRR

The Kessaria, carrying two Gustav Karls on its back, took off after only a hundred meters of taxiing. It hovered as if saluting Kenneth standing in front of the control building. It gradually gained altitude and headed southwest.

With the Penelope's head facing the sky, Lane shouted towards the heavens, "There's no way Mafty would be near Ayers Rock!"

The Kessaria accelerated, drowning out Lane's cry, and vanished into the sky that still held the colors of the night.

Like Lane, none of the unit members could confirm that Mafty's forces were hiding around Ayers Rock. The damage inflicted on them in this single skirmish would prove immense.

If Kenneth had believed Gigi's whim as a clear prophecy and sent twice the forces at that time, Mafty would have been annihilated, and the tragedy of Adelaide could have been averted.

Especially with Lane's Penelope, the results would have been even more certain.

That, too, must have been a matter of fate.

Within ten minutes or so, Kenneth and Lane's unit took off from Alice Springs, and headed for Adelaide.

Chapter 17

Uluru

Before the white men began to corrode this vast continent, the Aboriginal people called it "Uluru," a sacred land with Ayers Rock and Mount Olga standing tall.

As dawn's light crept over the horizon, it painted the monumental monolith with a fierce, earthy red, its imposing form casting shadows upon the barren wilderness. A tinge of air pollution intensified the rock's fiery hue as the sun's rays grazed its face.

Atop Ayers Rock, a listening device had been installed, stirring the slumbering Hathaway and his comrades nestled at its base.

"Everyone! We're pulling out!"

Their detection was so swift one might think the ancient Aboriginal gods had granted them this gift of foresight. It was naught but a sound borne on the wind, yet it seemed something more.

"Mobile suits, proceed to Gawler as planned!"

"Roe! Can you evacuate?"

"It depends on the number of enemies, I guess."

Roewest Heinrich, a man as bold in character as in stature, responded.

Indeed, only a man of such mettle would undertake a task demanding a journey of seven hundred kilometers from the nearest coastline.

Neither monetary gain nor ambition could entice one to accept such a mission with its uncertain prospects. Only the truly reckless or free-spirited would suffice.

Hathaway's concerns were assuaged by Rowe's confident assurance of escape.

As Hathaway mounted the Gundam, Fabio Rivera and his cohorts arrived, swift as thieves in the night.

"Hey! Mr. Mafty! Are you alright?"

"I'll fend them off! The strategy meeting will be in Adelaide! Go!"

"Right on! Don't die on us!"

"Yeah...!"

The Xi Gundam roared to life, lifting Hathaway's spirits just as easily.

He realized the importance of having people like Roewest and Fabio on his side.

"Enemy units: two! One Base Jabber...!"

Roewest's voice crackled over the radio from his trailer as the six Galsezons and the Gundam began to hover low to the ground.

However, among the machines gathered here, only two additional mobile suits joined the Golf and Emerald units, with four Galsezons carrying no mobile suits onboard.

Hendrix, mourning his wingman lost in the previous night's skirmish, was understandably anxious during the evacuation.

"Damn it!"

Hathaway strained to hear Rick's voice, tinged with frustration, amidst the noise of the Minovsky particles, but he remained silent.

The eight trailers under Roewest's command set off one after another toward the west, their shadows stretched out across the barren, flat landscape.

"All Galsezons, disregard the enemy and proceed southward!"

Hathaway manipulated the Gundam to arrange the containers abandoned by the last trailer in two tiers between Ayers Rock and Mount Olga.

Sixteen rocket launchers in total.

The triple-stacked rockets, carrying six projectiles each, were designed for mobile suits. They had been modified specifically for Mafty's guerrilla warfare tactics.

Two small external cameras were placed on either side of the rocket launchers, serving as makeshift sights.

Sequestered within the easternmost shadow of Mount Olga's Valley of the Winds, the Gundam connected the external cameras' feed to the display and input the launchers' firing angles.

The enemy was already close enough to discern details, with one of them appearing to move in a rightward direction.

They seemed intent on pursuing Raymond's Galsezon unit.

"Will they ignore the movement here?"

With a click of his tongue, Hathaway raised the Gundam, moving it westward through the Valley of the Winds before showcasing further movement north and south.

He made it seem like they had more units.

This subterfuge prompted the Base Jabber heading south to alter its course from the southern edge of Ayers Rock to the north.

"They must be frightfully simple-minded..."

Hathaway watched the retreating trailers led by Roewest, feigning a sense of security as he displayed his deceptive movements.

However, as the concentration of Minovsky particles intensified, the camera's radio waves and the launchers' remote control signals became increasingly unreliable.

No choice remained but to receive these signals within a one or two-kilometer range in a direct line.

BAM!

A searing burst of light erupted within Mount Olga's Valley of the Winds.

"...!"

Thanks to Hathaway's timely retreat, he avoided disaster.

The Gundam swept from the northern side of Mount Olga to the west and emerged in the south.

There, the faint radio waves of the two mobile suits charging headlong were captured by the small cameras.

However, the radio waves were weak.

Under these circumstances, it was impossible to confirm the positions of the launchers on the display and aim accurately. The feed was reduced to a monochrome still image.

"Tch...!"

Hathaway discharged his beam rifle, alerting the enemy to his position.

Simultaneously, he advanced rather than retreated, using Mount Olga as a bulwark and narrowing the distance to the launchers.

The two Gustav Karls split left and right, attempting to flank Mount Olga from the north and south.

As Hathaway assailed the northern unit with his beam rifle, he unleashed a torrent from the rocket launchers.

BOOM!

The sudden, swelling explosion likely also set off the remaining rocket launchers, but it was impossible to identify anything in the blinding light that seemed to push back the dawn.

During that time, Hathaway took advantage of the momentum from the explosion to close in on the Gustav Karl that had circled around to the north.

WHOOOSH!

He unsheathed the beam saber and swiftly closed the gap.

"You're mine!"

The enemy pilot's panic, exacerbated by the explosion from a fusion reactor behind him, worked in Hathaway's favor.

VVVZZZ!

The beam saber required no excessive energy.

The Gundam's beam saber severed the Gustav Karl's beam rifle, cleaving through the manipulator's base at the shoulder.

The Gundam's leg struck the Gustav Karl's head, disengaging from the mobile suit, and skimmed low across the ground as it moved eastward.

"...!?"

Through the sandstorm, the Federation's Kessaria appeared to falter on the other side of the Valley of the Winds.

It was hovering around ten meters above the ground.

The sandstorm, spawned by the explosion, continued to roil the surroundings.

The Gundam approached the Base Jabber concealed by the sandstorm, but unbelievably, the Kessaria didn't attempt evasive maneuvers, struggling to control its swaying in all directions.

"...!"

Hathaway propelled the Gundam out of the sandstorm's turbulence, alighting on the Kessaria's deck.

THUD!

The unit momentarily sank as if attempting to dislodge the Gundam but swiftly regained its balance.

"I recommend you surrender! If you resist, I'll drive the beam saber through your head!"

Hathaway's words reached the bridge through the contact line.

"We won't resist! Spare our lives!"

"We want to land, but we must distance ourselves from the explosion's epicenter!"

Such distant voices, characteristic of the contact line, reached Hathaway's ears.

"Head south!"

"We're scared of the radiation. We're only equipped with standard gear."

"Go!"

Hathaway imagined that the enemy was quite shaken by the weight of a single Gundam, which was equivalent to two Mobile Suits.

"We'll be fine. Just go!"

"I'm doing it!"

One of the voices on the bridge belonged to Gigi.

"Gigi!?"

Hathaway, thinking his ears must be deceiving him, couldn't imagine the current situation and refrained from speaking any further.

Hathaway recalled the state of mind when he had stood by Kenneth and greeted the captured Gauman Nobil.

The Kessaria smoothly soared through the sky, leaving behind Ayers Rock.

Above them, a mushroom cloud glittered in the morning sun, continuing to expand.

"Crew, out now!"

Hathaway landed Kessaria on the plain and disembarked the entire crew.

Though dumbfounded by the sight of unfamiliar mobile suits on their own ship's deck, they were equally concerned for their own well-being.

"Is that everyone!?"

When Hathaway shouted through the external speaker, the hatch on Kessaria's bridge ceiling opened from below.

"...!?"

Sure enough, there was Gigi Andalucia.

"Take me as your prisoner."

Gigi used the microphone in her hand to address Hathaway through the contact channel. Her voice was audible only to Hathaway in the cockpit.

"Y-yeah, sure..."

As Hathaway offered a vague response, Gigi vanished from the hatch and exited through a side hatch of the bridge.

What was she thinking? What had she been doing?

While Hathaway struggled to comprehend the reality of Gigi standing before him, she strode towards Kessaria's crew.

"Who is that woman!?"

Despite his elation at unexpectedly encountering Gigi, he consciously bellowed in an intimidating manner.

One of the pilots uttered something.

"A hostage? You insidious lot!"

Hathaway disregarded the pilots' pretexts, hollered, grounded the Gundam, and positioned it between the crew and Kessaria, extending the Gundam's manipulator towards Gigi.

"Put the woman on this! Hey! Help her!"

Hathaway shouted at the pilots, concerned about the elevation to the Gundam's palm.

"What will become of us?"

"We won't kill you. But we will destroy the Kessaria."

"How the hell are we supposed to get home!?"

"Your allies should notice that mushroom cloud. Rescue will come soon."

With Kessaria's crew aiding her, Gigi clambered onto the shield-equipped Gundam's palm.

"...!?"

Her gestures and appearance were unmistakably Gigi.

Moved by the sight, Hathaway recalled his inescapable predicament with Keria Dace, tasting bitterness in his mouth. He had no choice but to elevate the Gundam's manipulator in front of the cockpit.

"I trust our comrades monitoring Alice Springs will observe your main forces' swift movement and rescue you!"

As Hathaway called out, he slowly stood up the Gundam, placed Gigi at its chest, and began to ascend.

"Girl, cover your ears!"

Hathaway warned, mindful of the crew's hearing, then discharged a single beam rifle shot, obliterating only Kessaria's bridge.

With that alone, Kessaria assumed a posture as if nuzzling its head against the ground, emitting a faint plume of fire.

It would be dangerous if the fire spread to the missiles, but it should not result in a massive explosion in the engine section.

Hathaway, leisurely gaining altitude while turning around, leaving behind the battlefield of Uluru.

Chapter 18

Narrow Space

Hathaway slowed the Gundam to a near-hover, then opened the hatch in front of the cockpit.

"Hang on, Gigi!" Hathaway shouted, leaning out of the cockpit as the console panel folded away.

"Ha-Hathaway...!"

She was straining herself, clinging to the Gundam's finger for dear life.

Hathaway extended his hand, unable to resist glimpsing the desolate landscape speeding below through the gap beneath his feet.

It was no more a welcome sight for Hathaway than the infinite void of space. A shiver ran down his spine.

"Ready!"

Gripping Gigi's waist, Hathaway widened his stance to draw her nearer. Wide-eyed with terror, she cautiously eyed Hathaway's arm, bearing her weight.

"Throw your body towards me."

"Towards you, Hathaway?!"

"Yes. Don't think about anything else. Just let the wind carry you!"

Hathaway confirmed the position of the seat behind him while feeling Gigi's warmth against his chest.

"One, two... three!"

In harmony with Hathaway's cue, Gigi extended the arm that had clung to the Gundam's finger and surrendered her body to him entirely.

Hathaway pushed his own body backward as if kicking off with both legs.

THUD!

The seat creaked faintly, and the comforting weight and thickness of Gigi's body pressed against Hathaway's chest.

"Hathaway!"

"How did we end up meeting like this?!"

Hathaway lifted the console panel while cradling Gigi on his lap.

"That's because--!"

Gigi's voice was muffled by Hathaway's helmet.

With the mushroom cloud looming to their left rear, Hathaway increased the Gundam's speed.

Perched on Hathaway's lap, Gigi leaned forward to avoid hitting her head on the helmet, shifting slightly to catch a glimpse of his face.

"Even at a time like this, you've got a pilot suit to protect you, Hathaway..."

"Eh...?"

Hathaway couldn't quite grasp what Gigi was trying to express with her words.

But that moment of confusion on Hathaway's part made Gigi's heart seize up.

"It's okay..."

Hathaway interpreted Gigi's reaction as a lighthearted jest.

Come to think of it, this was the first time they had been in such an intimate position.

"Gigi..."

Hathaway subconsciously tightened his embrace around her waist.

"I longed to see you. I never thought I'd find you here, but I'm so happy."

"Hatha--"

"I know. My eyes and senses are focused outside. It's rare that we get to meet like this. I don't want to waste our time together in a place like this."

As he spoke, Hathaway's gaze darted across the visual display.

"..."

Gigi remained in Hathaway's arms, but her body held a stiffness, a tension he did not perceive. Absorbed in the urgency of the moment, he addressed the reality Gigi had pointed out.

"I can't keep flying like this. Gigi, you'll have to sit in the auxiliary seat beside me."

"There's no chair."

Gigi's voice carried a hint of wanting to be possessive of Hathaway, but it also conveyed consideration for not causing him pain.

"I'll set it up now. If I don't make sure we're ready to face our enemies, even if I want to be with you forever, we'll both be dead in an instant."

"That's logical, isn't it?"

Gigi twisted her waist atop his lap, trying to see Hathaway's face from the opposite side.

Her movements seemed to Hathaway like an expression of her affection, perhaps even a coy attempt to appease him, akin to a courtesan's maneuver with an older patron.

Yet Hathaway's heart could not fully yield to Gigi, still shackled by the guilt of his thoughts about Keria.

However, Gigi said something he couldn't have anticipated.

"What you just said, it's a lie."

"...? What's a lie?"

Gigi's words were a sudden discord, jarring in the intimate silence.

"Being with me forever? You?"

Gigi's blue eyes pierced him as if peering into the depths of Hathaway's soul.

"How much do you know about me?"

Hathaway misunderstood Gigi's demeanor, his mind rushing to Kenneth.
"I don't like that. Depending on my answer, you'll change what you're willing to say, right?"

Gigi's words carved a chasm between them.

"I suppose I asked the question in a way that leaves me no choice..."

Hathaway raised the Gundam's cockpit, waiting for the vibrations to settle, and then pulled out the auxiliary seat from the supporting arm.

"While my life isn't exactly peaceful, as you imagine, and I can't be with you right away, my feelings were sincere."

"Still, I don't want you to say those words carelessly. That's what weak men do."

As she settled into the auxiliary seat, Gigi's voice was resolute.

"I'm sorry. I'm ashamed."

Hathaway, upon her admonishment, could faintly imagine what lay at the depths of her heart.

It was the gulf between someone like Hathaway, who had a family, and someone who did not.

The Gundam soared low over the undulating red earth.

"I'm impulsive. I'll reflect on that."

"..."

Gigi tensed on the seat, her body rigid, and offered no response.

The silence between them thickened, heavy and somber, pressing upon Hathaway. He lowered the Gundam even more, steering toward their next destination, Gawler.

"I was just curious about how much the Circe Unit knows about us. I wanted to find out."

"Ah...That..."

After a considerable pause, Gigi finally answered Hathaway.

He couldn't help but steal a glance at her profile as she spoke, relief washing over him as he noticed her expression soften.

"It's alright. I'm not bothered by what you said. But I want to believe that you're stronger than this, Hathaway. It's sad if you're not...."

"Thank you... Until you said that, I regretted how thoughtless I was in assuming your feelings were the same as mine. It's probably because I'm too ordinary. It's the insensitivity of someone living this kind of life."

Hathaway deliberately focused on the display in front of him, pondering his excessive talkativeness.

Once again, silence ensued.

"The Captain is suspicious of you, but he doesn't know you're Mafty."

"I see... That's kind of lonely..."

That was Hathaway's true sentiment.

"It's not a lie. I'm just caught between you and the Captain, wanting to see what happens between you two. But looking at this mobile suit, are you really Mafty itself?"

"Yes, I may not be the strong man you expected, but I am."

It wasn't out of annoyance.

By now, Hathaway believed that lies would hold no sway over Gigi. If they did, she wouldn't be drawing closer to him like this.

At the very least, Gigi didn't seem like a prisoner of the Circe Unit, which suggested she harbored a secret.

Hathaway grew conscious of his suspicion towards Gigi, but she spoke again, confounding his thoughts.

"You shouldn't do that. You're going too far."

"Why? You expected that, didn't you?"

"Mafty itself... Mafty may be a person's name, but it's also the name of an organization, isn't it?"

"Yes, but in reality, I'm currently filling the role of Mafty."

"I see... You've taken on quite a burden, huh..."

Gigi's words shattered Hathaway's suspicion.

Her voice conveyed authentic empathy, not the artifice of a girl playing the role of a spy for Kenneth. Hathaway could hear the sincerity.

"...!"

Hathaway found himself at a loss, unable to fathom what Gigi expected from him.

If Gigi was, as she claimed, truly neutral and nothing more, then her words might be more understandable.

But at this moment, deciphering her intentions was an insurmountable challenge for Hathaway.

"Do you know about the news of the forceful arrests in Davao or the Oenbelli massacre?"

"Yes..."

"Wouldn't you think that such events would cause public opinion to condemn the actions of the Federation government?"

"Public opinion, you say, but that's the opinion of the space colonies. Those who identify as Spacenoids have little interest in Earth, and the opinions of space colonies won't put any pressure on Earth. That's why the ministers and central bureaucrats are still descending to Earth."

For the first time since meeting Gigi, Hathaway felt he expressed thoughts befitting Mafty.

"I see... So you really are Mafty, then..."

Hathaway turned to Gigi as she spoke, but she was intently gazing at the unchanging scenery on the right visual display.

"..."

Her eyes were cool and, at the same time, reflecting a transparent sadness.

Seeing Gigi in such an unguarded state, Hathaway was convinced that Kenneth couldn't have sent her as a spy.

If he wanted to send a spy, there would be no need to use a Kessaria or approach with a formation that could allow their mobile suits to be shot down.

Hathaway squinted at the unchanging scenery of the reddish-brown continent, where bushes of red, yellow, and green stretched out, and felt sadness similar to Gigi's.

The two of them, enveloped in their machine's confined space, shared a sadness of the same nature, yet their positions were slightly misaligned.